MARY 'N' MARY

Edith Francis Foster

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MARY 'N' MARY

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To the humble voyagers

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Lost, Strayed, and Stolen	11
II.	Dividing the Bossy	20
III.	Mary Merington's Garden	30
IV.	Mary Murray's Garden	39
V.	"Mary 'n' Mary"	50
VI.	Speaking of Snakes	59
VII.	In the Poultry Business	67
VIII.	Babes in the Wood	76
IX.	The Man Who Ran	86
X.	The Field-hospital	98
XI.	Larry	110
XII.	A Birthday Coming	121
XIII.	The Birthday Morning	131
XIV.	The Birthday Party	142
XV.	Found — Where?	156
XVI.	The Stormy Night	164
XVII.	A "Spunky Child"	172
XVIII.	Not Mary Murray, at All!	182
XIX.	Molly Burton's Story	192
XX.	Really Truly Twins	201

FULL-PAGE ILLUSTRATIONS

PAGE

MARY 'N' MARY . . . . . *Frontispiece*

"WHEN THEY LAID HIM DOWN IN THE PATH, HE CRIED OUT" 90

"HE SAT WITH HIS BACK AGAINST THE WALL" . 149

MARY 'N' MARY

CHAPTER I.

LOST, STRAYED, AND STOLEN

Cross, — oh dear, yes, cross as two sticks!

Brown eyes can look the crossest of any eyes, when the brows above them are all puckered into fierce little scowl wrinkles, and the mouth below them is pulled 'way down at the corners.

Mary Murray's eyes were just the color of a ripe, shiny horse-chestnut, just dropped from its burr into the curly, crackling, October leaves; and with her pink cheeks, and her dimpled chin, and her splendid mass of wavy, red-brown hair, she was usually a very pleasant child to look at. But on that hot June afternoon, as

she trudged up the dusty lane, carrying a pail that was much too big for her, she scowled discontentedly, and scuffed her bare toes in the dust, and grumbled to herself, till you might have been almost frightened to meet her.

"I hate that old calf! Wish there wasn't any calf! Just drinks and drinks the whole time, and I have to carry all the water. The boys might do it sometimes. This pail is too heavy — I'm going to pour some out."

She stopped, tilted the pail, and let the water trickle over her dusty little feet.

It felt cool and pleasant, and presently the dusty feet looked so nice and clean that she stepped out of the dust and walked carefully in the roadside grass to keep them so.

The pail was not much lighter, perhaps, but it had taken Mary's thoughts away from her troubles, and the puckers in her eyebrows began

to smooth away. She even felt a little sorry about the bossy; she felt almost as though her crossness might somehow do it harm, or bring it bad luck; and she began to half take back her ill wishes.

"Good enough bossy, I suppose — but he does drink an awful lot of water! He's funny, though," and the last of the scowl wrinkles were giving way to some other, smile wrinkles, as she turned the corner of the lane and thought how the bossy would jump about at the end of its tether and baa for joy, when it saw her coming.

Really she loved that bossy dearly. She would have cried her eyes out if anything had happened to it. But the pail was heavy and the sun was hot, and she wanted to be back, playing in the gravel-pit with the other children. So perhaps it was natural she should feel a little cross, though she did not look like a pleasant child as she came up the lane.

The bossy was tied by the roadside because there was no grass for it to eat at home. As you went down the lane you passed first the big

barns and sheds that belonged to Mr. McGowan, the contractor, and then some vacant, gravelly land, all overgrown with weeds, and the gravel-pits, where Mary loved to play. Then came the little shabby old house, where Mary Murray and all the other Murrays lived, and a few more cottages like it, with plenty more children in them, who loved the gravel-pits, too, and played and quarrelled in them all day long.

There was no green grass about the houses, nor anything else that was pretty. All the ground was trampled and dusty, and wherever there was room grew little, straggling patches of potatoes and cabbages.

So up the lane and along the open, grassy road that it led into was a pleasant walk for Mary Murray when she was not cross. Every morning she led her bossy up and tied it under some tree by the roadside, where it could eat grass and lie in the shade; and twice a day she brought it a pail

of fresh water, and came once more to lead it home at night.

It did seem as if the boys might have done some of this, — for there were plenty of boys in the Murray house; but they had a great many things to do out of school, — baseball, and swimming, and berrying, and all such things, — and really it was much easier to make Mary do it. And Mary loved the bossy, and did not often complain.

She came out of the lane, now, and turned toward the maple-tree, under which she had left her charge that morning.

There was no bossy there!

Away went the last of the scowl wrinkles; astonishment and fear and grief all mixed together and chased them out of sight in a twinkling.

Mary dropped her pail and ran to the tree, as if she hoped her eyes were mistaken, and she could feel the bossy if she could not see it.

There was the rope, still carefully tied as she had left it — but the rope was old and frayed, and it had parted in the middle!

Where was the bossy now?

So grieved, so frightened she hardly knew what to do first, Mary looked up, then down the road. At last she set off running, calling "Bossy! Bossy!" in a trembling voice, and with tears running down her cheeks.

For a little way there were no houses, only broad green fields with fine old oaks and elm-trees here and there, and it all belonged to the big, rich Merington place. Then came the lawns and shrubberies that surrounded the house.

When she reached the high iron fence in front of the lawn, Mary Murray stopped running and glanced in, — not because there was any chance that her beloved bossy would be there, but just because she always did so. She loved to see the velvety grass of the lawn, and the long beds of bright flowers beyond, and to catch glimpses of wonderful people in beautiful dresses, on the wide verandas and in the big, "baskety chairs" under the trees.

The "fairy ladies," as Mary called them in her thoughts, were very wonderful; but the person she most loved to see was the "fairy little girl," a child just as big as herself, who always wore fairy-like, white dresses, and lovely ribbons in her long, dark hair.

There she was, now! Mary had never seen her so near before. She was alone on the grass in the middle of the lawn, and as Mary looked her eyes sparkled through the tears, and she gave a cry of joy; but it was not for the fairy little girl, — she scarcely looked at her at all.

Her bossy, — her precious, lost bossy!

There it stood happily cropping the clover in the short, sweet grass, and the fairy child held the broken old rope in both her little white hands, and followed the calf as it moved, browsing, over the smooth turf.

Near by, the great iron gates of the drive were standing open. Mary Murray dashed through them, and flew across the grass, without a thought of fear of the strange, grand place, straight to

her bossy. She snatched the rope from the other child's hands, and threw both arms about the calf's neck.

"My bossy! What are you doing with my bossy?" she cried.

"It's *my* bossy," said the other child, calmly. She was astonished at the sudden attack, and her face flushed, as she stood ready to defend her rights; but her soft gray eyes could not flash fire like the chestnut brown ones that blazed at her over the surprised bossy's head.

"This is my bossy; I found him in the road, and I am going to keep him. I think you must be mistaken," she said, politely. But Mary Murray broke in, fiercely:

"You stole him — you stole him! He's mine and I'm going to take him right home!"

Then indeed the gray eyes lighted up with wrath. Stole him! Two little white arms went

round the bossy's neck from the other side, and if that bossy's head was not pulled right off then and there it must have been because bossies' heads do not come off easily.

The children pulled fiercely from either side, both crying, both scolding, and between them the bossy, very much astonished and disturbed, braced its feet wide apart to keep its balance, and baa-ed a loud protest.

Just at that moment, a lovely lady in a beautiful, trailing, white dress, stepped out on the veranda of the big house and looked across the lawn. What she saw was two children closely embracing a pretty calf, and she smiled and said aloud, "What a pretty picture!" But at the same moment she heard the angry voices, and saw how the poor bossy was being pulled about.

It was not a pretty picture — it was a battle!

CHAPTER II.

DIVIDING THE BOSSY

THE lovely lady caught up her long, white gown and ran down the broad stone steps. She hurried across the grass, calling as she came, "Children! Children!—Stop! Stop! Mary, what is the matter?"

The children paused, wild as they were with anger and excitement, as she came up to them. Neither would give up her hold on the disputed treasure, but they turned their flushed and tear-stained faces toward Mrs. Merington; and the child with the gray eyes began to explain so

eagerly that her words tripped over each other as they hurried out.

"It's my bossy, mamma! I found him in the road, and I'm going to have him for a pet because my dog is dead, and I shall tie a blue ribbon on his neck and lead him. He's so beautiful, isn't he, mamma? and he's not hers at all, for I found him myself!"

Mrs. Merington saw how it all was, and she almost laughed; but she said, very quietly, "Come here to me, Mary."

Both little girls started to obey her, although Mary Murray did feel a moment's surprise that the "fairy lady" should know her name. But she could not give up her bossy, even for a moment, and she still kept one arm tight around its neck as she approached.

Mrs. Merington put her arm around her little daughter.

"There, there, dear — hush! Stop crying, so that I can understand you."

Then while the child struggled to calm herself, her mother turned to the stranger, who stood her

ground and looked back at her bravely, angry and anxious though she was.

But the lady did not look angry; she even smiled in a friendly way, and held out her hand to draw her nearer.

"What is your name, little one?"

"Mary Murray, ma'am."

"What, — both Marys?" the lady laughed. "Why, no wonder the poor bossy does not know which he belongs to!"

Mary smiled in answer, — a little, doubtful, anxious smile. "But he is *my* bossy; he knows he is," she protested. "He's my very own, and his name is Mike."

Then the lady began to ask questions, and while she talked she held Mary's hand and smiled at her; and Mary began to feel soothed and happy, and to love the fairy lady very much.

Soon the whole story was told, and in a very little while it was all made straight. Mary Merington was brought to see that the bossy belonged to the little girl who had lost, not to the one who

had found him, and with many wistful parting pats and strokings she consented to let Mary Murray lead him away.

But Mary Murray was not happy. She had triumphed, — she was free to take her dear bossy home; but now she had all and the other child nothing! She felt in her own heart all the sorrow of seeing it led away, down the road and out of sight, — of not having it any more! and she could not bear to leave things so.

She went close to Mary Merington and spoke, shyly but kindly. "If I had two bossies," she said, "I would let you keep one of them."

But Mary Merington only gazed sadly at the one bossy that she could not keep, and said nothing.

Then Mary Murray's generous heart overflowed. She could not keep the bossy all for herself, though it was only one!

"You may have half of him," she cried.

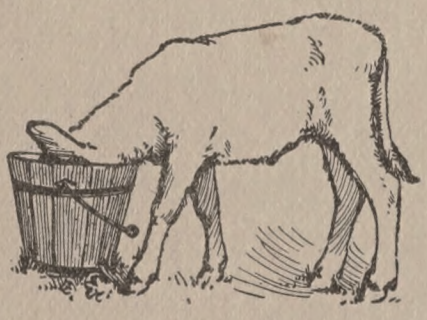
Mary Merington looked at her in questioning surprise.

"And you may choose which half," she went

on (for generosity is a flower that grows and blossoms wonderfully fast, when it once begins to grow). "And you may come and play with your half every day!"

Mary Merington began to smile. She looked at her mother, who smiled and nodded, well pleased with Mary Murray, and then at the bossy, who was nibbling grass quite unconcerned; and then she threw her arms about its neck and hugged it. And Mary Murray put her arms around from the other side, and they smiled at each other over the bossy's head.

After this, everything was easily settled. Mary Murray was to tie it always on the side of the road nearest to the big house, and Mary Merington was to come every morning to see him drink the water which Mary Murray brought. And every afternoon he was to nibble clover behind the iron fence; also, afternoons, he was to wear the blue ribbon. For when it came to choosing halves, choice proved



to be impossible. Two big, soft ears, — two big, dark eyes, — four pretty, white feet, — all these were easy to divide; but only *one* little, moist, black nose, and only *one* funny, wagging, white-tasselled tail, — how could they choose between them?

Then Mary Merington had a bright idea.

"Let's divide the day, instead of the bossy," she said. "He is yours in the morning, and I'll come to visit him; and afternoons he'll be all mine, and you'll be the visitor."

And so it was settled.

Mamma said nothing to all this, but she listened and watched the children. They were so friendly and eager now, — so generous and fair in their plans, that she had not the heart to spoil the pretty scene by grown-up caution. She silently made up her mind to find out all about Mary Murray and Mary Murray's family, and if she proved to be really "as nice a child as she seemed," to let these pleasant plans work themselves out. For it had occurred to her that this quaint little pair, — Mary Murray and her bossy,

— had walked up the road and into her life for a purpose, and that she must welcome them and make friends with them, for her own Mary's sake.

Mary Merington had been delicate all the spring. Her cheeks were pale and she drooped a little, so that her mother worried for fear of round shoulders. But when the good old family doctor was called in to advise he found nothing very wrong about her.

"Turn her out to grass," he said. "Take her into the country and let her run wild. That's all she needs, and it's better than a drug store full of tonics."

But the difficulty was that Mary Merington simply wouldn't run wild. She didn't know how!

She was gentle and docile, and did her best to please her mother by playing out-of-doors, but how could one little girl run and romp and shout all by herself? Wheeling her great doll in its carriage was pleasant but not very lively exercise. She played dutifully with her shuttlecock,

but soon tired of doing it all alone. Her little dog had been her best companion, always ready for a race; but now he was dead, and in spite of much petting and spoiling from her mother's visitors, and the gay summer life of the big country house, little Mary was often listless and lonely for a playmate of her own age.

Now here seemed, at last, to be the very thing she needed, — the natural, wholesome companionship, on equal terms, which "only" children so often spoil for the want of.

There could certainly be no doubt of Mary Murray's perfect health and strength. The way she stood up straight and held her little chin high, her bright eyes and cheeks, and her alert movements, all showed that.

Yes, if she proved to be a "nice child," it would be a happy thing for Mary Merington that Mary Murray's bossy broke his tether and ran away that afternoon.

So the two Marys made friends unhindered, and planned good times ahead, with happy, child-like certainty that nothing would interrupt or interfere with them.

The very next afternoon Mary Murray was to bring her bossy to eat clover on the lawn, and all three of them were to have a lovely time, playing together till supper-time.

But now it was high time for both Mary Murray and her bossy to be at home. She

gathered up the frayed rope and pulled the reluctant Mike away from the short, sweet grass that he was enjoying too well to leave without a protesting "ba-a-a!"

She looked lovingly and wistfully at her new friends as she said good-by, quite unable to find any words to express her gratitude and pleasure in their kindness.

But they understood, and both of them kissed

her warmly before they let her go. And when she turned at the big iron gates to look back, the fairy little girl still stood there, with her wonderful white dress, and long dark curls, and waved her little hand.

Mary Murray went homeward in a blissful dream.

CHAPTER III.

MARY MERINGTON'S GARDEN

And oh, to think that, after all, Mary Murray couldn't go!

For that same evening a message came for Mrs. Murray to go out cleaning all the next day; and so, of course, Mary must stay at home from school and take care of Baby Joe.

It was lucky for the Murrays that this happened pretty often, for there was so little money in the Murray house at the best of times that a day's cleaning made a great difference; but poor Mary had to lose so many days of school that if she had not been a very bright child she surely would never have been promoted at all.

Mary was so used to this state of affairs, and so clearly understood the necessity of it, that she never thought of rebelling. But to-day it did

not seem as much fun as usual to be keeping house all alone, getting dinner for the boys, and pretending she was little Joe's mother.

Every time she thought of the "fairy lady" and the "fairy little girl," and the beautiful time she would have had, her throat began to ache the way it does, you know, when you want to cry and are trying very hard not to.

And as she couldn't help thinking of it all a good deal, I am afraid that Baby Joe did not have as much fun as usual, either.

He was a big, clean baby, with a very pink face, and creases around his neck, and the cunningest little hollow in the back of it. He had two teeth already, and he laughed and showed them, no matter what happened. So Mary got through the day pretty well, and comforted herself by thinking of the good time as only postponed till to-morrow.

But the next day it rained; and that certainly did seem too bad! Cleaning and baby-tending were matters of course, and couldn't be helped;

but that "it should have to go and rain" was really too much. And the brown eyes gloomed, and the little frown wrinkles made her face as cloudy as the sky itself, that morning.

It was a long, long day, and by night Mary had grown to feel as if her beautiful good time were nothing but a dream that she had waked from too soon, and the pretty fairy Mary and her beautiful mother were as far away and unreal as they had always been.

What had she, Mary Murray, to do with grand houses and fine people?

Three days is a very long time to a little girl; and when the third day proved to be perfectly pleasant, and there was no work to keep her at home, Mary Murray felt almost afraid to make the longed-for visit, after all. Suppose this other Mary had forgotten all about her, and did not want her any more? Suppose she had gone away? Suppose —

But Mary was what Mrs. Murray called a "spunky child." "She'll go through fire and water but what she'll do anything she's set

on doing," Mrs. Murray would say, sometimes vexed and sometimes laughing (for spunk is not always a good thing to have in the house).

To-day, however, spunk meant just courage.

Mary hurried home from school to put on her clean blue gingham frock, and tie up her pretty copper-brown curls with her best white ribbon (nicely washed and ironed, and kept for Sundays).

And she marched up the long avenue, under the great elms, as bravely as a little soldier, though her heart was thumping hard, — as many a brave soldier's does, too.

Across the wide lawn she saw the gay broken colors of the flower-garden; and among them a little white figure fluttered for a moment like a big butterfly, and then dropped to the ground.

The fairy little girl was all alone, and very busy about something.

As Mary stood still and watched her she would hardly have been surprised to see her unfold a pair of fairy wings and flutter over the flowers instead of among them.

Just then Mary Merington looked up and saw her "company." Instantly she jumped to her feet, dropping a trowel, and upsetting two flower-pots, and clapped her hands.

"Mary Murray! Oh, Mary Murray!" she cried, and ran to meet her, and caught her by both hands. "Oh dear, I thought you weren't coming at all, it's been so long! I felt as if there wasn't any *you*, after all, — as if you were only one of the 's'pos'ns' I make up for myself, about a little girl to play with me. Do you make 's'pos'ns' that way?"

They stood swinging their clasped hands together and smiling at each other, while Mary Merington chattered until she had to stop for breath.

Then she remembered her gardening, and led the way back to the flower-bed where she had been at work.

"This bed is my 'specially own garden," she explained. "I planted all the seeds in it myself.

I planted a lot more than these, too, only somehow they don't seem to come up very much; so papa gave me these lovely geraniums, instead, and I am setting them out all my own self. I don't believe mamma will mind," she added, looking rather doubtfully at her grimy little hands and the earth stains on her delicate white frock, "because she said I was to take all the care of my garden, and not ask John or any one to help me. But you may help, because you are company. Would you like to hold it up straight in the hole, or would you rather pat down this nice, soft mud, round it, while I hold it?" she asked, hospitably.

Down they went on their knees before the flower-bed, and really you could hardly have told the difference between transplanting geraniums and making mud pies!

Mary Murray was delighted. She thought she had never seen anything so beautiful as those dear little bushy green plants, all standing in a row, holding up their big bunches of pink and white and red blossoms. There was not a bit

of envy or selfishness in her heart, and she was just as happy, and worked as lovingly, as Mary Merington herself.

It took some time to do the setting-out, because the little gardeners changed their minds so many times about the way the colors looked best that I suppose every geranium in the row had been dug up and patted down again at least three times before the job was done.

At last, however, the last scarlet geranium was settled in its place at the end of the row, and there they stood, pink and white and red and white and pink, all along the front of the bed; and there stood the two Marys and gazed at them, beaming so with pride and satisfaction that they were a much prettier sight to look at than the flowers themselves, if there had been anybody there to see.

It was almost sunset, now; time for Mary

Murray to go and get her bossy and go home; and Mary Merington ran into the house and got permission to go with her as far as the tree where the bossy was tied (with a new, strong rope, this time).

They played a little with Mike, feeding him with clover blossoms; then the little girls kissed each other good-by, and they parted.

And on the way home Mary Murray had a happy thought! Such a happy thought that she smiled all the rest of the way, and she lay awake for at least ten minutes that night, smiling over it in the dark.

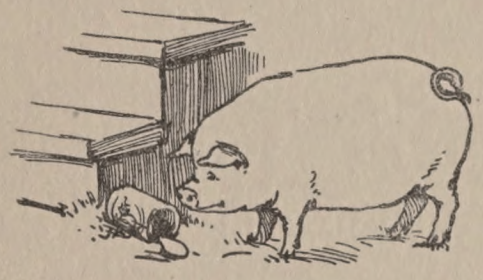
This was the thought — she would have a garden of her own!

For several days the children did not meet at all except at the bossy's tree, where Mary Merington waited each afternoon at four o'clock, until Mary Murray came from school. But not even to this delightful new playmate had Mary Murray said a word about her happy thought. It was not that she meant to make a secret of it, — I do not think it occurred to her to do so.

But her garden belonged to that part of her life which Mary Merington did not come into at all, — the Murray part.

Then, all at once, Mary Merington came in, and became a part of it herself.

One afternoon the Ready children, who lived in the house next door, — the house with the fine large pig in the side yard, — were astonished to see the "fairy little girl" come running down the lane, happy and eager as though she were coming to a charming new place, — and so it was, to her.



When she reached the picket fence before the Murray house, she stopped and went very softly. Perhaps she might catch Mary Murray herself in the yard, and "surprise her."

She crept close to the fence and peeped through a broken gap. No Mary was in sight, but something else was, which made her open her soft gray eyes very wide, and stare in silent surprise and perplexity.

CHAPTER IV.

MARY MURRAY'S GARDEN

THE little yard between the house and fence was bare and dreary looking, the earth only half covered with weeds and straggling grass, trampled by many careless feet.

From the front door to the street ran a narrow footpath, trodden harder and barer than the rest, and along one side of this path was the thing at which Mary Merington was gazing with wide, puzzled eyes.

A long, narrow strip of earth had been freshly dug up, and into it at even distances had been stuck a row of leafy green twigs, evidently broken from the low, spreading apple-tree that grew at one side of the house.

Each twig bore at its top a bunch of something, bright red and white alternately; and as

Mary Merington looked closer she saw that these bunches were rags, gathered into a kind of rosette, and tied firmly to the twigs with strings!

Just as the meaning of it all began to dawn on her mind, Mary Murray herself suddenly appeared around the corner of the house, carrying an old, rusty watering-pot which she held at arm's length, to keep the streams of water, trickling from many leaks, away from her dress.

She went slowly along the path, and sprinkled each apple-tree twig in turn. Her face was intent and serious, but happy; and now and then she stooped to straighten up a twig or to pull out a rosette, with caressing fingers, as if she loved them.

Mary Merington understood now perfectly.

She knew the pleasure of a "make-believe" herself, but the artistic completeness of this one was something more than she had ever imagined, or perhaps could have done alone.

She forgot all about her plan of surprising the absorbed little florist, but ran to the sagging gate and pushed it open, crying, "Oh, Mary Murray, what a splendid flower-bed! How did you ever think of it?"

Mary jumped, and splashed the water over her shoes. (It was a surprise, after all!) But she turned joyfully to her visitor, heedless of wet feet and dress.

"Aren't they pretty?" she said, exultantly. "The leaves haven't wilted a bit! And I'm going to have some pink ones, too."

She set down the watering-pot and pulled from her pocket a bundle of faded pink calico, torn into strips about three inches wide.

Mary Merington was delighted. "Oh, let me help," she said. "I see how you do it," and down she dropped on the ground beside Mary Murray.

And then the two little heads, the dark and the shining one, and the four busy hands and the twine and the rags were all mixed up together, while the pink flowers blossomed one by one, between the white and red.

At last the row was finished, and the children stood looking at it with the happy satisfaction that you only get from the things that you do or make all yourself. You know that feeling. It was better, some ways, than real flowers, Mary Merington said, because you could pull these up and change them around all you liked "without any bother about roots."

And so they did! If those make-believe geraniums were "changed around" once, they were twenty times in the next few days.

The children played together first in one garden and then in the other, and it would be hard to say which they enjoyed most, the real flowers or the make-believes.

But one day, as Mary Murray knelt to pull a ravelling from the finest of her white geraniums (which were particularly liable to ravel, being made from an old sheet, whereas the scarlet ones represented Mary's own little worn-out flannel petticoat), Mary Merington's affectionate eyes saw a little cloud drift across the sunshine in her friend's face.

"Isn't it a good one?" she asked, anxiously, for she had fashioned that particular specimen herself, and was proud of it.

"Oh yes, it's beautiful!" Mary Murray answered, warmly. "Only," she added, a little wistfully, "there isn't any smell to it."

Mary Merington stood and looked at her silently, and as she stood a new idea grew in her heart, and grew so high that it blossomed in her face as she smiled at Mary Murray.

"Oh, come with me!" she cried. "Come home with me this minute, quick! I've thought of something lovely!"

It took but a moment for their petition to fly in through the open kitchen window and for Mrs. Murray's consent to drop out through it; and then the two Marys hurried up the lane, one eager and inquisitive, the other smiling and mysterious.

Arrived in her own garden, Mary Merington hastily produced her little spade and trowel. John, the gardener, mowing the lawn, was begged for a big basket; and Mary Murray stood watching, bewildered, while the other Mary counted her geranium plants.

"Eighteen — nineteen — twenty! I've got twenty. You shall have exactly half,—that's ten."

Poor little geraniums, they must have felt discouraged! Only a week since all that shaking about and digging up and patting down! Almost a week, and they were just beginning to feel at home, and to push out little new rootlets in quest of food and drink.

No matter,—up they came, "exactly half" of them; and into the basket they went, and down the lane they hurried.

Before supper-time there was a row of real, growing, blooming, spicy-sweet flowers between the Murray doorstep and the sagging gate; and Mary Murray hung over them in perfect bliss, stroking the velvety leaves and smoothing the earth about their roots.

Mary Merington was scrubbing her dainty white hands in the rusty sprinkling-pot, and contemplating the geraniums with more pleasure (and a better kind of pleasure, I think) than any flowers had ever given her before.

Somehow, they looked far prettier here than the ten left behind in her own garden, — here where there was nothing else that was pretty to compare them with.

Presently it occurred to her that it was very quiet. She looked around. Mary Murray was standing gazing, with a little pucker between her eyebrows that meant something, at the little pile of rag-flowers thrown carelessly into the path.

Suddenly she dropped on her knees, and began gathering them up into her skirt.

"I can't! I won't!—let them lie there and die!" she said, almost angrily, and her lip was trembling. "I've loved them all this week, and they s'posed they were truly flowers, and it isn't fair!"

"No, it isn't," Mary Merington agreed, with quick sympathy. "We must plant them again. Where? Here?"

"No-o," said Mary Murray, thoughtfully.

"No, I don't want them where they can *see* the truly ones, at all. It might make them feel bad. They shall have a garden all by themselves."

Over in the fence corner, behind the straggling lilac bushes, was a nice little hidden nook where trampling boys and marauding chickens never came. It was shady, but rag-flowers wouldn't mind that.

"And oh, I'll tell you what let's do," said Mary Merington. "Let's have another bed, of asters. My mamma had lots and lots of them last year, and they were beautiful. And then we can have every color in the rag-bag, only think!"

Very soon indeed the bed of asters bloomed beside the geraniums, and the shady corner was gay with them.

"And now they can live and make believe grow till the frost comes," said Mary Murray, contentedly, "and when they freeze, that's proper flower dying, and they will go to the flower heaven."

And right here I will stop to say that that is just what they did. The leafy apple twigs stayed fresh and green week after week, in their damp, shady bed. The flowers, to be sure, drooped and faded from time to time, — but do not all flowers do that? And these could be so quickly and easily replaced.

Besides, when you were tired of one color and wanted a variety, only think how nice to be able to turn a pink flower into a blue, or purple

into red! That was better than the "truly" garden.

Yes, I really think, if there was any difference, the children found that garden more interesting than the other; but they tended the geraniums faithfully, too, and watered, and weeded, and stirred them up so often that they decided to survive all the transplantings, after all, and grew and bloomed as bravely beside the hard-trodden path as their sisters in the beautiful garden up at the great house.

Mary Merington's cheeks grew pink and her hands brown with all this delightful out-of-doors business; and Mamma Merington, looking on, saw her little daughter brighten up from day to day, forgetting to be listless or lonely. She was forgetting herself, too, which was the best of all; and the little trace of spoiling was fading quite away.

As for Mary Murray, if one were to find fault with her it would be for a trait that her brothers were wont to call "bossing." She was so eager and intent, always, on the thing that she was

doing that she was a little apt to feel that the thing *must* be the way she wanted it; and among the little Readys and Donovans, and other children in the lane, that sort of feeling was too common to make perfectly peaceful playtimes. There were often storms and sudden showers in the open lots which were the common playground.

But this new friend was different, and Mary Murray loved and admired her too much, even when they had grown quite used to each other, to be self-willed and domineering with her. Her voice and her manners, too, grew a little softer, a little gentler, as the summer went on.

"It is doing them both good, every day," said Mamma Merington to Papa Merington, well pleased.

CHAPTER V.

"MARY 'N' MARY"

THERE couldn't be a more delightful playground than that big open pasture down the lane, just beyond Mary Murray's and the other little houses. All the children gathered there after school, and the smaller ones, who did not go to school, played there from morning till night, in the sunshine and breezes. Bare brown feet and wind-blown hair, — tanned and dirty and happy, — what a crowd of them there was from the five little houses!

Near the lane was the old, unused gravel-pit, where the little ones sat in the warm sand like a flock of chickens sunning themselves, and dug the clean yellow earth out of the low bank left by the men and carts, and scooped it into old pans and cans with rusty iron spoons, — busy and contented and safe.

Many times in the course of the morning a mother's head would be thrust out of some back window in the row of houses, and a single glance "over in the Lot" would assure her that the particular little blowsy head and pink or red frock she was looking for was safe and happy within call.

Beyond, in the sparse brown pasture grass, the older girls hunted for birdfoot violets and innocents, and "played house" in a delightful wilderness of building stone, dug many years ago from the gravel-pit, and abandoned, and now known as the "rock house."

As for the boys, it would be rather hard to say what they could not or did not do, from "scrub" ball games to Indian fighting. There was room for everything, and just the right kind of places to do it in.

Naturally it was not long before Mary Merington was introduced to the pleasures of "the Lot" by her new friend. The two children were fast becoming inseparable, but of course Mary Murray did not at once lose all interest in her old friends and neighbors, and to Mary Merington the new world of romping, shouting, chattering children was exciting and fascinating. She kept always close to Mary Murray, — from the first she felt a difference between her friend and the rest, — "not at *all* like Maggie Ready and Nellie Donovan," she told her mother. She shrank a little from the noise and bustle, yet it drew her back again; and oftener and oftener she would beg for leave to "go down the lane and play to-day," instead of having Mary Murray play quietly with her in her own beautiful big garden, or in the shady summer-house under the trees.

It must have been about this time that the two little girls received their new name (not

quite a nickname), — for that began in "the Lot." As they were always together it was often necessary to speak of them together, also, and "Mary Murray and Mary Merington" was much too long to say in a hurry, as you can see. "Mary 'n' Mary" was the natural result. It was a friendly little joke, at first, among the girls they played with; then the boys, Mary Murray's brothers, took it up at home, in the vain hope of teasing her.

It did not, at all. From the first, the two Marys failed to see anything peculiar or funny in the fact that their two names were alike. Perhaps it helped a little to draw them together, for when they shared all their apples and chocolates, it seemed natural to share their name, as well.

But Papa Merington thought it funny when he heard it, and began at once to call them so.

And so pretty soon everybody had forgotten that it was a joke at all, and at the big house and the little house as well as "in the Lot," "Mary 'n' Mary" was the natural, matter-of-course name of the pair.

At the beginning, mamma had felt a little doubtful of the wisdom of turning her delicate, sensitive little daughter loose among this sturdy, boisterous crowd of youngsters; but she said nothing to Mary, only waited patiently and watched carefully for results.

It was certain that her little girl was growing rosier and plumper all the time; that she stood up straighter, and her shoulders were flat, and she ate a little more breakfast every day, — but as yet no sign of roughness had crept into her soft voice and gentle manners.

But one day she came running in at supper-time with scarlet cheeks and wide eyes, too eager to tell her adventures and claim sympathy and support to eat any supper at all; and all night she was flushed and restless. And after that there was a little change in Mary 'n' Mary's playing, though neither of the children realized it.

It had been an afternoon of adventure.

The larger boys, two of Mary Murray's brothers among them, had been having a game

of ball, and the girls were playing their favorite game of "poison," jumping from one to another of the big, scattered stones of the "rock house." (You know how it is played, — all the ground is water, and if you touch your foot to it you are drowned.)

In this game Mary 'n' Mary were both at a little disadvantage with the other children; for bare toes can curl and cling on rough or smooth, while the two Marys had to balance very nicely and jump cautiously to keep from slipping.

It was a good while now since Mary Murray had "gone barefoot" like the others.

She did not know herself why it had ceased to be the pleasure it once was, to feel the cold, wet grass underfoot in the morning, and the warm road dust after school. It was one of the little ways in which she had grown different since the new friend came into her life.

Mrs. Murray grumbled a little about wearing out shoes in summer time, but she agreed that Mary was getting too old for going barefoot now, and was not displeased to see her "looking like a lady."

And Mary faithfully mended and wore her old shoes, changing them twice a day, at school-time, for a better pair, and knew only that she "felt nicer" so. Even now, jumping perilously from stone to stone, she did not envy her playmates' tanned and scratched little feet.

Both the boys in the ball game and the girls on the rocks were making plenty of noise; but at last a sudden outburst of cries and shouts from the boys made the girls look around, to see that the ball game had stopped short, and all the players were running and shouting and throwing stones, along an old stone wall that crossed the lot. They were trampling down the tangles of blackberry and goldenrod, beating it with sticks, and crying, "There he is! Head him off! Chuck that rock at him, Billy!"

"Oh, it's a snake!" cried some of the little

girls, and others shrieked and laughed and huddled on the highest of the play-rocks, as the hunt came nearer.

Mary Murray was not excited. She did not like snakes, but she was too sensible to be afraid of one at that distance, and she paid no attention to the fuss. It was the boys' affair, not hers.

But suddenly the other Mary gave them all a great surprise.

As soon as she realized that all those boys and sticks and stones were hunting down one little creature, she screamed louder than the rest, and sprang from her stone to the ground. "Oh, they're hurting it! They're killing it! Mary! Mary!" she screamed.

She was wringing her hands, and her cheeks were white.

"Oh, stop them! Make them stop!"

The other children stared at her, too astonished

for a moment to speak. The child was frantic with pity and sympathy, — for a snake! a horrid, nasty snake!

"Why, of course! Everybody kills snakes. Why shouldn't they?" they asked, perplexed.

But Mary Murray did not wait to ask questions or argue; her loyalty was quick and warm. She did not like snakes, but at that moment it was not the snake which mattered: it was the white cheeks, and the great tears welling over in the soft gray eyes. To stand by Mary Merington was her one instinct in the first moment; in the next, I am afraid, the fierce joy of battle awoke in her heart.

With one bound she was down beside Mary Merington, and had caught her hand.

"We'll stop them — come!" she cried, and ran.

CHAPTER VI.

SPEAKING OF SNAKES

NEVER was a more surprised crowd of boys than that, when their manly sport was brought to a sudden halt by the interference of two girls.

The frightened, tearful Mary and the fierce, threatening one were squarely in their path, and unless they pushed them out of it, or walked over them, there was nothing to do but stop and argue.

But the boys were angry. They ordered the little girls to get out of their way, and asked them what business it was of theirs.

Mary Murray did not really know yet, but that made no difference to her. "You sha'n't kill it! I won't let you!" she declared, and as her indignant brother advanced

to push her bodily out of the way, her eyes fairly blazed at him.

"Don't you dare touch me, Tim Murray!" she said. Her voice was not loud now, but she looked squarely in his face, head and shoulders above her, and Tim Murray stopped.

There was a point in the Murray family beyond which Mary usually had her own way, although all the boys were older than she.

She had reached that point now; and Tim stopped.

But the other boys were jostling each other as they crowded around the two Marys, and argued the question hotly. Nobody stopped to think that it was too late now, — the chase was done, already; for by this time their prey was safely coiled under some friendly rock in the wall.

"They bite you! They are poison! If a snake bites you, you swell up and die!" the clamoring voices cried.

Mary Murray said not a word; she just stood

facing them, and breathing hard. It was Mary Merington, — the pitiful and trembling Mary, — who answered.

"No, they don't, — nothing is poison but a rattlesnake and a water-snake, and there aren't any here. Those little striped snakes wouldn't hurt if they did bite, — my father says so! And they are too scared to bite, anyway."

The soft, eager, pleading voice, so different from their own, made the boys stop and listen in spite of their anger. They even condescended to reason with her.

Above the confusion one of the smaller boys shouted that his brother knew a feller that had a black snake as long as from here to that wall wind right 'round his legs, and if a man hadn't 'a' killed him he'd 'a' choked that feller!

"We-e-ll! A black snake, six feet long!" said Mary, scornfully, forgetting to plead. "That isn't little garter-snakes, no bigger than your finger!" It wasn't very clear, perhaps, but clear enough for the purpose of argument.

Two boys, talking together, claimed, one that

snakes killed ducks, the other that they ate eggs.

At this Mary Murray broke into a peal of laughter, and somehow, when Mary Murray laughed like that everybody who heard her was apt to laugh, too. Even the vexed and baffled boys grinned reluctantly.

"Oh, just think how he'd look!" she cried; "that little snake, when he'd swallowed an egg! Suppose he ate half a dozen!"

They all grinned then,— they couldn't help it!

But Mary Merington was too much in earnest to lose sight of her argument.

"These little striped snakes and green snakes around here can't eat eggs," she said, seriously, "but they do eat bugs and worms and flies and things, that do harm,— hundreds and hundreds of them. When my papa was a little boy he used to catch snakes, and put them in his garden to eat the bugs,— toads, too! He had a great big fat old toad for a pet, that lived under a

rhubarb plant, and he would come hopping when he called him, and he fed him with flies. Did you ever see a toad eat a fly?"

The boys were listening, now, and interested, most of them; though a few, giving up all hope of the postponed snake, had straggled back toward the deserted ball ground, loudly discussing the habits and character of the snake tribe as they went.

None of Mary's audience had ever seen a toad eat a fly; probably none of them had ever let a toad live long enough to eat anything.

"His tongue is ever and *ever* so long," she explained, "and he sits in the sun and winks till a fly comes buzzing, and then his tongue just *shoots* out, quick as lightning — just like that! — and the fly is gone."

(Several of the little boys, listening absorbed, unconsciously went through the motion she described, with their tongues.)

"My papa and I have watched them, lots of times," she went on, "and oh, isn't a snake's tongue pretty? Watch one and see.

"It is so *bright* red, and he just jiggles it back and forth all the time, like that!" (And her little forefinger jiggled very fast indeed, to illustrate.)

But the boys, interested though they were, could not let a girl do all the talking. One of them boldly changed the subject, in order to tell what he knew about mud-turtles, having been more familiar with their habits and, indeed, on terms of intimate friendship with several.

The other girls had joined the group, as soon as it seemed sure there was no more danger, — and gradually they all drifted back to their different games.

But I do not think they all forgot that little talk, and I am sure that many an innocent, useful snake and toad had reason that summer to thank Mary Merington for her courage and her tender heart.

When the little girls had gone back to the rock playhouse, Mary gave them another sur-

prise, by sitting down on the nearest rock and beginning to cry.

They were all around her in a moment, anxious and sympathetic.

No, she wasn't sick, she said, — there wasn't a thing the matter, only she felt tired. It was the only way she knew of expressing the reaction she felt after her painful excitement.

She did not care about playing any more, and pretty soon she started for home, Mary Murray escorting her all the way, with motherly anxiety. But to Mary Murray's astonishment, she found that her friend was full of generous admiration for *her!* Mary Merington praised *her*, for "being so brave, — running right in front of all those big boys, and making them stop! *She* never, never could have done such a thing!"

"Why, but you *did!*" said Mary Murray, bewildered. "You went every step that I did, and I never should have thought of doing it if it hadn't been for you! And you are afraid of boys, and I am not. (I should think not! with four of them in the house, bothering all

the time!) So you were twice as brave as I was."

Neither of them would give up her point; and when they submitted the case to Mamma Merington, each eager to prove that the other deserved most credit, she did not settle it, either; for she praised them both, and kissed them both, and called them two gallant little crusaders.

But it was after this adventure that she began to think of so many nice games and places to play around home; and when Mary 'n' Mary did go down the lane to play with Maggie and Nellie, it usually happened to be at an hour when the larger boys, and girls too, were away at the big high school ball games on the common, and only the gentler and younger children were to be found in "the Lot."

How did mamma know about the ball games? Well, that is a way mothers have; they know almost everything.

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE POULTRY BUSINESS

"PAPA! Oh, papa!"

Papa Merington was deep in the political editorials of his newspaper, on the shady side of the veranda. He smiled as he heard the eager call and the little feet running across the gravel of the driveway and up the steps; but he did not put down his paper, — he just lifted it a bit higher, and waited.

In a moment, a little brown head popped under it and up, and Mary pressed between his knees, all out of breath, and too eager to wait, even for papa's kiss.

She began with her lips against his. "Oh, papa! The carpenter men are pulling down John's little house — "

"Why, that's all right, Marykin," he said.

"John is going to live in the nice, new rooms over the stable. He doesn't mind: he is pleased."

"Oh, yes," cried Mary, almost interrupting in her hurry. "It isn't John,—but papa, they are carrying it all away in a cart, and I want the plaster! Mayn't I have it?"

"The plaster? *You* want the plaster?" said papa, slowly, trying to take in this new development. Somehow Mary was always surprising him, in these days. "Why, what on earth do you want with old plaster, chicken?"

"It's *for* chickens, papa. We want it for the hens," said Mary, still breathless and very much in earnest. "Don't you know it is the best thing in the world for hens to make egg-shells of? Please may I tell the men to leave some for us?"

"My child, you shall have all the plaster on the place if you will kindly pause and explain how you come to be in the poultry business.

What hens are these you are making egg-shells for?"

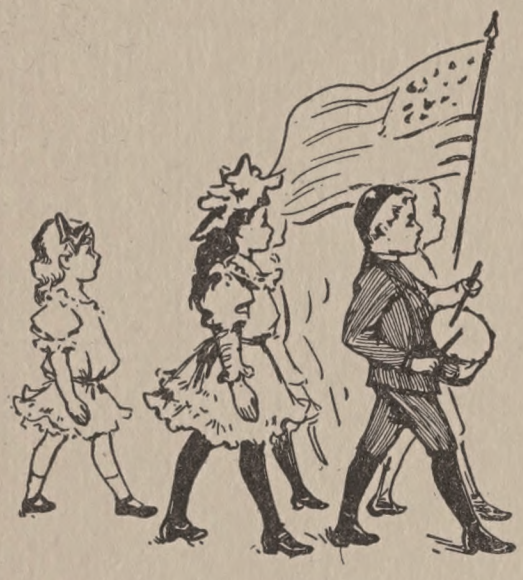
"Why, they are Mary Murray's hens, papa. Don't you know Mary has seven of the most beautiful hens, all her own? And when they lay a dozen eggs she puts the money in her bank. And we *must* make them lay, for eggs are very low, now, — only twenty-five cents, just think! And Mary does need the money so much!"

"Well, we'll have to see about these egg-shells," said papa, rising and throwing down his paper. "Now tell me as we go, what is the pressing need of egg money at this particular time?"

Mary seized his hand joyfully, and pulled him along the driveway toward the stables, dancing with impatience, and chattering fast. Mary could talk so fast!

"You know school closes in two weeks, papa, and there is going to be the most splendid time! All the children march from the schools to the town hall, and there's a concert, and they all sing, and all the people go. I wish we did such nice

things at Mrs. Dupont's school! But Mary hasn't any white dress, you know, papa, and of course they all wear white. So Mrs. Murray says Mary may have a new dress, only she can't afford a very pretty one; and there's oh, *such* a pretty one in the big store over at Berket Centre, with lace and little ruffles! And Mrs. Murray says she can only spare four dollars, but Mary may spend the money in her little bank and perhaps that will make enough to get the ruffly one,— it's two dollars more. And I do so want Mary to have the ruffly one! I wanted her to take all the money in my bank, too, but Mary won't take it, papa — she won't take a cent, just think! So the hens just *must* lay eggs, you see!"

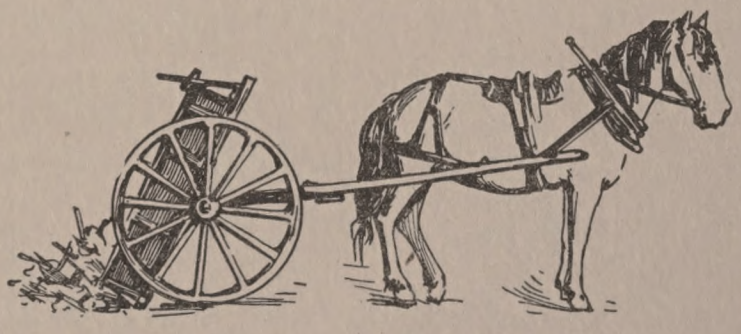


Probably Mary Merington had never in her life thought about her own clothes as costing money. She wore her pretty, dainty

things as unconsciously as a kitten wears its fur.

The only money she knew or thought much about was the bits of silver in her own little purse and bank; and these she spent a few cents at a time, or hoarded carefully to buy Christmas gifts, like every other natural, wholesome child. So she could enter into her friend's plans and savings with perfect sympathy, and the extra two dollars looked every bit as big to her as it did to Mary Murray.

Her breath gave out entirely about the time they reached the scene of operations behind the stable, and she looked on in silent satisfaction while papa despatched a cartload of rubbish in the direction of McGowan's Lane.



Then as they started back to the house hand in hand (Mary dancing now with pleasure) he began:

"Well, now, in view of the depressed condi-

tion of the egg market, and the pressing necessity for repairing the deficiencies of Mary Murray's wardrobe, it seems to me that some more immediately effective expedient than a diet of old mortar should be devised."

Mary loved papa's big words: it was a joke between them. She never stopped to puzzle over their meaning, — somehow she knew what he meant without any trouble. She hung on his hand and skipped along, pleased and expectant. It was sure to be all right if papa was "taking an interest."

"Now, I should think," he went on, "that a better market might be found. For instance, a couple of 'strictly fresh' eggs, — big ones? brown ones? —" ("Oh, yes, the biggest, brownest!" Mary put in) — "would be worth about twice as much to me as the ones I had for breakfast this morning. That would be five cents apiece. Do you suppose Mary Murray would be willing to supply me with strictly fresh eggs for my breakfast every day? If so, I will agree to take her entire output."

Mary dropped his hand and clapped her own.

"Oh, papa, papa! how dear and nice you are! Now we can have the ruffly one, and maybe the hair-ribbon besides! We were so afraid we couldn't afford to get them both."

It was time by now for school to be out, and Mary ran joyfully down the drive and along the road to the bossy's tree, to feed him with clover blossoms and tell him all about the splendid plan while she waited for the other Mary, to make her heart glad with the good news.

Now Mary Murray was a very "literal" child. That means she heard and remembered exactly what people said, and went by it, word for word.

Papa Merington had said he wanted her eggs "every day." Accordingly, next morning, when he came downstairs, there was Mary Murray on the piazza waiting for him.

In her hand was a little basket, with a clean red napkin tucked neatly over it; and under the napkin were two big brown eggs.

Papa Merington was very serious and businesslike. (He never used his big words to Mary Murray, since he found that it puzzled and distressed the "literal" child, who tried her best to understand each word.) He praised the eggs, — and indeed they were beautiful eggs, — and then he drew a handful of money out of his pocket and picked out two bright, new five-cent pieces, to pay for them.

And Mary Murray ran all the way home, to eat her breakfast, and wash the dishes, and lead Mike up the road to his shady tree, before half-past eight o'clock.

Next morning she came again; and this time there were three eggs in the little basket, and Mary Murray's face beamed with success.

The other Mary beamed, too, with sympathy; and when papa saw her eyes across the breakfast-table watching his egg-cup with such loving pride, he made a heroic effort and ate all three, though it was one too many for comfort.

The next day there were three again, and the next day, five! One was quite warm.

Mary Murray's eyes were a good sight to see as her little palm closed tight over the shining silver quarter; but Papa Merington laughed and said he should have to take a partner or he should burst, trying to keep up his end of the contract; and he asked Mary if she thought her hens would lay two eggs apiece a day, when they had eaten enough plaster.

Mary Merington laughed gaily at papa's funning, and promised to be his partner, and eat her share of the eggs. Mary Murray laughed, too, and felt the kindness, if she didn't quite understand the joke. But as she went home her face grew very thoughtful, then sober, and at last very determined.

CHAPTER VIII.

BABES IN THE WOOD

THAT same afternoon, when Mary 'n' Mary had led home the bossy, Mike (gaily adorned with a wreath of daisies, and struggling hard all the way to back himself out of it), they went into Mrs. Murray's little parlor, and took down the little red and green painted bank from the mantel-shelf.

This was a regular daily ceremony now, and was very carefully performed. Each of the Marys in turn weighed the little bank in her hands, and shook it to listen to the rattle of the coins inside; and by these means, helped out by Mary Murray's memory of her business dealings for the past month or so, they guessed at the

amount of the little hoard, and calculated how soon the grand shopping expedition to Berket Centre might be made.

To-day they decided that there must be at least a dollar and a quarter there; and Mary Merington was joyfully reckoning on five or even six eggs to-morrow, when Mary Murray broke in.

"If there are, I sha'n't sell 'em to your father," she said, firmly.

"What?" gasped the other Mary, her air-castles all tumbling about her ears. "Why, Mary Murray, papa promised! You made a bargain! Why not?"

"No," Mary Murray declared, resolutely, "your father doesn't want so many. He whistled — you know he did. He didn't expect there'd be so many when he made the bargain; so it isn't fair. Besides," she added, as a clinching argument, "he said he'd burst."

And all her friend could urge did not change her determination. She was, you know, a literal-minded child, and also a "spunky" one; and

both these qualities were aroused. Mr. Merington should have his three eggs a day (provided, of course, that the hens agreed to it), and all eggs beyond that number must find another market.

It seemed the lady for whom Mrs. Murray had been working had once bought eggs from her; and Mary's plan was to save all over Papa Merington's three a day, until there were half a dozen, and then carry them to this other customer, over on the West Berket road.

And being "spunky," as beforesaid, she stuck to this plan, in spite of all persuasions. She was almost cross about it, and Mary Merington had to give it up, disappointed and perplexed.

But of course papa would make it all right the next morning, when they explained the case to him, she thought; and so she went out to play with Baby Joe in his little soap-box cart, and made a new row of red-and-blue-plaid asters, and forgot all about the egg business for the time.

But next morning two things happened.

First, Mary Merington slept too hard and too long, so she was not on the veranda, as usual, waiting for Mary Murray and the eggs.

Secondly, papa had had a message the night before, calling him away on business. So, being in a hurry, he paid Mary for her three eggs, promised to pay when he came home for all she brought meantime, and jumped into the carriage that was ready to take him to the station. There was no chance to explain the new plan, if Mary had meant to (but I do not think she did mean to; it would not be her way).

And so it happened that in three days a store of six brown eggs had been collected; and on the fourth morning, which was Saturday (the very morning Papa Merington was expected home again), Mary Merington asked her mother if she might go with the other Mary to Mrs. Preston's, over on the West Berket road, to take her some eggs.

It did not occur to mamma to consider the egg part of it; she merely made sure that it was

not too far, and that Mary Murray knew the way, and gave her consent.

Off went Mary 'n' Mary in high glee, with the little basket and the neat red napkin.

They started along the road, stopping to leave Mike his pail of fresh water, and console him with kisses and clover for the shortness of the visit, and then hastened on.

But when they reached the head of the lane Mary Murray suddenly thought of a new plan.

"Let's go across through the woods, — it's shorter than this way, and it's such a pretty road. I know a place where the red lilies grow, and if they are out we can get some for your mamma."

Gray-eyed Mary was always ready to go where brown-eyed Mary led, so they turned down the lane, past all the little houses, and on to the end, where a pair of bars led into the wood road.

It was pretty, — cool and shady under the pine-trees, flickering with sunshine and breeze

among the birches in the old clearings. The red lilies were in bloom, burning like little flames among the forest green, each one alone, here and there through the wood openings.

The children hunted for them among the trees, calling to each other with joyful cries at each new discovery.

Presently they came together again, each with her hands full of the gorgeous red and gold.

But where were they now? Not on the road, nor within sight of it. Intent on the flower hunt they had crossed a little ridge; and for a a few moments Mary Murray stood peering through the trees in an anxious puzzle. Mary Merington watched her face silently, waiting to be frightened when the time came.

"Oh, I know!" said Mary Murray at last. "We've come over toward the swamp, — it's right over there. If we get over that stone wall we'll be in a path that runs along this side of the ridge and comes into the road again."

It was a rough scramble through a little thicket of close-set pines, full of interlacing dead

twigs that caught at hair and hands and dresses; but after a short struggle (Mary Murray ahead), and a few tears and scratches, not worth minding, the little girls tumbled over the wall and found themselves in a well-trodden cow-path, that wound among the alders and witch-hazel along the edge of the great swamp.

Blueberries grew there, too, — high-bush blueberries, big and sweet, and most of them high over little heads. But a little jumping and climbing brought them down, along with a few more tears and scratches; and very soon Mary Merington's pretty embroidered handkerchief was a round, knobby bag, spotted with purple stains.

Cracker-pies! Does ever anything in the world taste so good, when you are tired and hungry in the woods?

Crackers were the rule, "between meals," in the Murray house, and Mary, who had a healthy appetite, usually started on any long expedition with a supply in her pocket.

There were two apiece. The children laid them out between them, on an old mossy log,

and carefully split and filled them with crushed berries. In a few minutes more the only traces left of berries or crackers were those around two rosy mouths and on ten dirty little fingers.

Then they found mitchella vines growing in the moss, and gathered and ate the pretty red berries (seedy and insipid after the blueberry feast).

Then they pulled up the bright-colored roots of the goldthread vine, prized as "good for canker," though neither of them needed it.

Then they looked up, and found that the glints of sunshine through the leaves had all vanished, and all the sky they could see among the tree-tops was a mass of rolling, purple-gray cloud.

"It's going to rain! Oh, we must hurry! You mustn't get wet!" cried Mary Murray, anxious as a mother.

They gathered up their treasures, the basket of eggs and the armful of red lilies, and hurried along the path, stumbling over the alder roots, and listening fearfully to the pat-pat of the first big drops of rain on the leaves overhead.

Other paths ran in and out among the alders, and the children kept to the ones that took them farthest from the swamp and nearest to the hillside.

It grew darker and darker. The big drops fell so fast that they broke through the shelter of the leaves; and soon the whole world was a dripping, chilly wilderness, and Mary 'n' Mary were a shivering, piteous pair.

They struggled on, clinging to flowers and basket, and Mary Murray tried, with chattering teeth and shaking voice, to encourage her friend, by insisting that they must come to the road pretty soon. But in fact she had no longer the least idea where she was.

At last even her "spunk" gave out.

They had climbed a little way up on the hillside, where the ground was dryer, and a thick growth of pine and scrub-oak gave them a little more shelter. Tired and breathless, they huddled under a bushy little oak-tree, and looked in each other's faces, wet with tears and rain together, with eyes full of fear and misery.

"Are we — lost?" whispered Mary Merington, and Mary Murray nodded silently, swallowing a sob.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MAN WHO RAN

For a long, dreadful minute neither of them spoke.

Each was struggling to keep back her tears for the other's sake, but each little heart was full of despairing terror. Mary Merington's eyes were fixed on Mary Murray's face, but Mary Murray's were gazing into the woods around as though trying to pierce straight through them to the lost road.

Presently her face changed a little. Was that —wasn't it — a path? — the faintest, narrowest track through the wet dead leaves where the scrub-oak grew thinnest, up the slope? She stood quite still, trying to make sure before she spoke.

Suddenly they both heard a new sound, above

the hiss and patter of the rain, — a rustling of branches up there on the hillside, and — yes, the sound of running feet!

For a moment it was a new terror. Wild beasts, — wild men, — who knew *what* might not break out upon them from the underbrush?

The sounds came nearer very fast. In a minute they began to get glimpses between the trees, and soon they could see him plainly, — a man running through the woods along that very path which Mary had just spied out.

As he ran he looked behind him over his shoulder, as if he were afraid of something that followed.

He was a young fellow, hardly more than a boy, strong and lithe; and he wore a soldier's dress of brown khaki, with a broad hat slouched low over his face to keep off the rain.

Mary 'n' Mary stood frozen in their places, holding their breath.

The man came nearer, and they could see that,

fast as he ran, he was choosing his steps and dodging the branches, so as to make as little noise as possible. He looked from side to side, and when he was only a little way from them he dropped suddenly upon the ground beside a thick low mass of scrub-oak.

For a moment he lay there panting; then as he raised himself a little and turned toward them, the children were amazed to see that he was laughing!

All at once the world began to seem a little lighter and warmer and safer: here was somebody to take care of them. The cold little fingers unlocked, and they would have started forward, — but at that moment a new noise made them stop again.

The man heard it, too, and raised his head alertly, like a hound, — listening, watching.

Men were coming down the hill behind him, talking, and breaking through the brush, making no effort to conceal their presence.

The man had stopped laughing; he raised himself on hands and knees, and crept stealthily,

noiselessly, into the thicket. When the branches had closed behind him, and the wet leaves ceased quivering, no one could guess that a man lay under them, holding his gasping breath to give no sign.

The other men came on, beating through the bushes on either side of the path, calling back and forth, laughing and joking. There were four of them, all young like the first, and dressed in the same trim brown blouse and leggings.

They did not seem to mind the rain, though once in awhile a man would say, "Ouch!" as a shaken twig poured its cold drops inside his collar, or a wet branch slapped back into his face.

Nearer and nearer, — one of them was close to the thicket, now; another moment, and he had broken through it. There was a stumble, a shout, and a laugh, and the rest came hurrying up. They all plunged into the thicket, and then loud, hollow groans began to mingle with the jolly voices.

Presently they came out, dragging the hunted man along with them. His legs and arms trailed on the ground in a dreadful way, and he groaned at every step. When they laid him down in the path, he cried out; but still the others laughed and did not seem to care at all!

All this time the poor puzzled children were standing motionless, too dazed with wonder at these strange doings to think of making any move themselves. They could not understand in the least what was going on. One minute it seemed to be all a game of "make-believe," and the next it was terrible earnest again.

When some of the men pulled out great sword-like knives from their belts, it looked like murder outright, and the two Marys were very near to screaming; but the men only cut branches from the trees, and bound them carefully and gently to the first man's leg, with yards and yards of white cloth strips.

They took his coat off, too, and wound more yards of the cloth around his chest. He protested at this, and the children heard him say

Edith Foster

indignantly, "Ain't it bad enough to be shot through the lungs, without getting wet to the skin?"

That was too much for Mary 'n' Mary. Shot! With one impulse they started out from their shelter.

"Oh, can't we help? Is it very bad?" faltered Mary Murray — and all the soldiers jumped, and turned and stared.

What a pitiful spectacle it was! Two little girls all soaked with rain, and trembling with the cold. The one with wet, dark curls clinging to her cheeks clasped a great sheaf of red wood lilies to her breast, and the one with the tangled mass of copper-bright hair gleaming under her dripping hat brim held a little basket, with a wet red napkin tucked over it.

"Help," indeed! *Some*body needed help pretty badly, — that was plain!

The wounded man sat up (stiffly, on account of the bandages), and the others gathered around the two children, asking a dozen questions at once.

Mary 'n' Mary tried to explain, but their teeth were chattering with cold and excitement, and it was hard work not to cry.

Somehow, though, the men made out the story, — the eggs for Mrs. Preston, the lilies, and the tangled cow-paths all jumbled together.

"And she's held on to the eggs all through!" murmured the wounded soldier. "Well, of all the plucky kids!"

He was trying to scramble to his feet, but the man who had been giving all the orders gave him a push with his boot-toe, not roughly, and rolled him over.

"Here, you keep quiet!" he said. "*For* a man shot through the lungs, you're a little too lively! It's a wonder if four men can't look after two kids without the help of a gory casualty! Hurry up with that stretcher, you fellows, and we'll get 'em back to camp."

The "casualty" lay still, and groaned worse than ever; but just then he met the troubled,

tender gaze of a pair of soft gray eyes, and he stopped groaning and gave Mary Merington a long, solemn wink.

After that she felt quite reassured, and whispered her conviction to Mary Murray that it was all just make-believe — he wasn't hurt a bit!

It was such a relief to be with somebody, — to feel that they were safe and being taken care of, — that Mary 'n' Mary were almost happy again. They almost forgot their discomfort and weariness, and looked on with great interest while the soldiers laid two birch poles on the ground, two feet apart, and wove a sort of rough mat between them, of the tough twigs and branches they had hewed off with the great, cruel-looking knives.

Meanwhile the man who gave orders, whom the others called "Corporal," explained the game of "make-believe" to the little girls.

He told them it was a field-day of the Ambulance Corps of the militia; which meant that the soldiers whose duty it is to find and help the wounded in a real battle had made a camp in the

woods, not far away, and were practising, so as to be ready to do their part if a war should come.

The children knew very little of wars and battles, but they understood what he meant, — that it was all a grand, grown-up game of hide-and-seek, and that their soldier was not really hurt or frightened. Their spirits rose, and they smiled at him shyly when he also told them that at the camp was a big, warm fire, and something good to eat!

Then the wounded man was picked up and laid on the stretcher, and the corporal gave the order to "double back to camp, before some people catch their death o' cold!"

"Double" seemed to mean to hurry through the woods at a great pace, the wounded man growling because his bearers joggled him and let the wet boughs hit his face.

When they reached the road they fell into a trot, the two men with the stretcher leading, and

the others following, each holding a Mary by the hand.

It was pretty hard for the little girls to keep up with the men's long steps, but it did them good, for presently they were quite warm again; and just as they were fairly out of breath the wood road came out suddenly into a wide, grassy opening, filled with a busy, noisy crowd of men in khaki.

CHAPTER X.

THE FIELD - HOSPITAL

It was a strange and wonderful scene to the children, and they gazed about them with wide eyes as their "stretcher party" crossed the clearing.

Under the trees at one side stood the empty baggage-wagons, the horses picketed near them, eating their dinner from the ground.

A big gray tent stood out in the open, and a number of men swarmed around it, hammering pegs into the ground and fastening the tent-ropes to them in a tremendous hurry, while an officer stood by, watch in hand, timing them.

But for most of the men the morning's drill was over, and now they were crowding around the big camp-fire in the middle of the field, laughing, chaffing, and skylarking, like the boys they

were, and very much in the way of the cook, whom they were all begging to "hurry up that stew!"

He was a fat, smiling black man, in a white apron, and he laughed in a fat, jolly way, as he answered them, and threatened them with his great long-handled ladle, when they jostled him.

His cooking dishes were bigger than wash-boilers, and the clouds of steam that poured up from them smelled of soup and coffee in a way to make any one wish it were dinner-time!

The children's party was the last to come in from the woods. The stretcher was placed carefully on the ground under an open canvas shelter, where other stretchers and a few more white-bandaged "wounded" men were gathered around an officer, who seemed to be examining the bandages and teaching the men.

Every one who spoke to this officer did so with one hand held up at the side of his hat in a funny way, and when he turned on his heel,

L. of C.

saying briskly, "Well, now, what next? Corporal Dunham, what is your case?" the children's corporal dropped Mary Murray's hand quickly, and raised his own to his hat brim in the same queer, stiff way.

"I don't quite know, captain," he answered. "Croup, I reckon,—but I am not very well posted in those things."

This was not a proper way to talk to a captain, but the officer did not hear it. He was staring at Mary 'n' Mary as if they were elves or pixies, sprung out of the woods by magic.

"Where on earth did they drop from? Who are they?"

"I think they are the Babes in the Wood, sir," said the corporal; and this time the officer heard him, and frowned and laughed, together.

"Discipline, Bob," he said warningly, and in the same moment he had Mary Merington in his arms.

I think the captain must have had some children of his own at home, for he certainly knew

just how to hold a little girl, and how to talk to her. It wasn't a minute before Mary Merington was sitting on his knee under a canvas shelter before the big hot fire, warming her cold feet and hands, and chattering away to him as if he were an uncle, at least. And close by was Mary Murray, warm and cosy too, still guarding her egg basket, and answering the questions of the two lieutenants and a sergeant — who all called one another by their first names.

Then the soup was ready, and the fat black cook announced dinner by beating on a tin pan with his big ladle; and all the soldiers came crowding around the fire, and the hubbub and jolly confusion were greater than before, if that were possible!

Mary 'n' Mary ate their hot, savory beef-stew out of tin dishes, with big iron spoons, in perfect happiness and content; and, between the warmth and their fatigue and the good, comfortable food, were presently as drowsy as two sleepy kittens on the hearth-rug.

All through dinner, however, they had kept

their eyes open, and missed none of the fun.

"Look!" Mary Murray whispered once. "There's our soldier!"

He seemed to have quite recovered from his broken leg and wounded lungs, for the bandages had disappeared, and he was the centre of the liveliest group of all; but they knew him by the laughing eyes and curly hair.

Just then he happened to look their way, and saw two eager pairs of watching eyes, — the brown and the gray, — and he met their gaze across the fire with the kind of smile that said they were good friends of his, and he was fond of them both.

After that, wherever he went, the little girls knew where he was; and they listened for his pleasant laugh, and watched the progress of a friendly wrestling match with the deepest interest.

As soon as they had had their dinner, and were thoroughly warm and dry, the captain prepared to send them home, — in

military state, with an escort of honor! One of the baggage-wagons was loaded, ready to return to the city, and a detail of men was ordered up to go with it. Among these the little girls were pleased to see "their soldier."

Each Mary was bundled up in a big, warm soldier's cloak. As she stood by the wagon waiting, Mary Murray heard the new friend's voice up above her say, "Give me the plucky one," and the next moment she was picked up like a baby, swung through the air, and found herself sitting beside her soldier on a great roll of tent canvas.

The heavy wagon bumped along through the deep ruts of the wood road, — presently bumped harder over the stones of a causeway, along the edge of a great meadow, — and then Mary Murray caught her breath in a great gasp of fright.

"Why, this is the Causeway! Were we on Dark Swamp Island?"

"Of course," answered the soldier. "Didn't you know it? Hadn't you crossed the Causeway?"

"No," said Mary, in a very low voice. She felt suddenly cold again. "I — don't know — how we got there!"

It was the soldier's turn to look scared.

"Good heavens!" he said. "Do you mean you came *through the swamp?*"

But Mary did not answer: her heart was beating hard at the thought of the danger past.

Not a child in Berket but had grown up in wholesome dread of "Dark Swamp," with its tangled woods, dangerous bogs, and black water, running back for miles among the hills. Never, never must a little girl put so much as one foolhardy foot within its borders, — not even to pick

the tempting little pitchers of the side-saddle flowers, or the dainty pink arethusas that grew among the tall wet grass of the great meadows, just inside its edge.

Mary 'n' Mary must have crossed only a small corner of the swamp, — but suppose they had not happened to keep to the left, as they

pushed blindly through the wilderness of alder and witch-hazel? And what if the soldier had not happened to turn into that particular little path in his game of hide-and-seek with his rescuers?

These thoughts were enough to keep them both silent for awhile. He felt her shiver a little, and he pulled the big cloak up closer about her, and held it there with his arm, as tight as though the danger was not all safely over.

The heavy wagon bumped and rattled across the Causeway, lurched up into the woods again, and rumbled on under the dripping boughs.

Mary's head was nodding with weariness, and some extra big bump would surely have pitched her out of the wagon, if the strong arm had not been around her. At last her head nodded over against the soldier's coat, and rested there, while she snuggled comfortably against him and dreamily watched the trees go by.

By and by they rumbled out of the woods into the highway; and after another long, sleepy mile, the wagon turned a sharp corner, and Mary

roused herself as it splashed through the ruts and puddles of McGowan's Lane, and stopped before the Murray house.

Things looked oddly around the Murray house. There were quite a number of people in the little yard; neighbors, with shawls or aprons over their heads, — for the rain was only a slight drizzle by now.

A covered carriage stood before the gate, and a gentleman was standing on the doorstep talking with Mrs. Murray, whose round red face looked anxious and distressed.

The children were lifted from the wagon and carried across the puddles to the gate. Mary Murray's soldier kept her in his arms. They were behind the others, and just before they reached the gate he stopped, gave her a big, strong hug and a kiss, and then set her quickly on her feet. Mary flashed one bright, warm smile up into his face, and walked quietly into

the yard, with her basket of eggs in her hand. Every one had turned to meet the newcomers, and there was an outcry of exclamations and questions, as the women pressed around them; but clear above it rose the voice of Mary Merington. "Why, there's papa! Papa!"

The gentleman on the steps was off the steps in an instant, and snatched his daughter from the soldier's arms.

"Thank God! Thank God!" he said. And then for a minute nobody said a word, but some of the young soldiers sniffed and cleared their throats, and the women wiped their eyes.

But Mary Merington, safe in her father's arms, was full of happy excitement, and eager to tell her story. Again the eggs and the bruised and broken remnants of the lilies were brought into evidence, and Papa Merington smiled as he looked at Mary Murray and her little basket.

When he had put his own Mary into the carriage, he stopped and bound the other one by a solemn compact to save for him every egg her chickens laid, even if it was three apiece all around.

And Mary Murray, with a deep sigh of relief and pleasure, promised that she would.

Then the carriage rolled quickly away, to take gray-eyed Mary home to her mother; and brown-eyed Mary turned around to see her soldier shaking hands with her big brother Larry, and slapping him on the back as though delighted to see him.

Larry was the oldest of the Murrays, and was not Mary's favorite brother, — in fact, he was rather a surly fellow at home, and apt to order the little sister about. But now he seemed as pleased and friendly as the other, whom he called "Dick."

From their talk Mary, who was listening with one ear while she answered her mother's questions, found they had been chums at school some years ago, before Larry left to work in the machine-shop. The soldier had remained in school and graduated, then had "got a job" in the city ten miles away, and the two had not met since.

He promised to come out and see them soon, and then, with a parting shake of the hand and one of his bright, friendly smiles for Mary, he was gone, and the heavy wagon jolted and rumbled away up the lane.

CHAPTER XI.

LARRY

After the adventure in Dark Swamp, — which ended so well and might have ended so ill, — there were no more adventures of any sort for Mary 'n' Mary, for awhile.

Mary Murray came up to the big house every morning, to be sure, with her little basket of eggs, and a strip of red flannel around her neck; but the more delicate Mary Merington was kept in the house for some days with a bad sore throat.

It was rather a doleful week for both the Marys, though they had the little "egg visit" in the mornings to console them; and one rainy day when there was no school, a long, happy afternoon together up-stairs, in "mamma's room," with its cosy grate fire and the desk and books,

and the broad, old-fashioned couch, piled with pillows, and big enough to keep house or go to sea in.

One day Mary Murray brought news with her. "Our soldier," Dick Saunders, had kept his promise and come again to see Larry. He had even stayed to supper; and although shyness and a very clear knowledge of her oldest brother's views respecting children had prevented Mary from seeing much of him, she had had a happy quarter of an hour after supper, while Larry was out of the way, leaning on his knee, and talking over the wonderful events of the "Field-day."

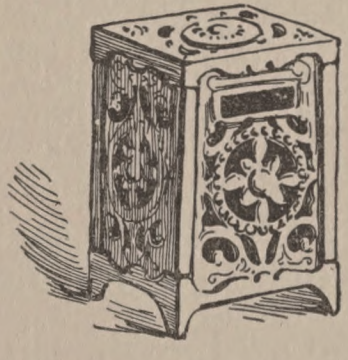
It was not quite so pleasant that he had engaged Larry to make a return visit to him in the city on the following Saturday. The Murray children all dreaded Larry's Saturday trips to town. He usually got home very late and very

noisy, and he was sure to be in such a surly temper the next day that even the boys kept out of his way. There were quarrels and reproaches between him and the elders, too, and a general sense of things gone wrong.

So it was with a vague feeling of regret, almost of pain, that Mary thought of her new friend and Larry together in the city. She did not want to associate the idea of Dick Saunders with those disagreeable Saturdays and Sundays.

But she did not tell all this to Mary Merington.

Meanwhile those wonderful hens "just laid and laid," as the children said, and one day



Mary Murray appeared in "mamma's room," bringing with her the little red bank in her two hands.

"Oh, oh, is it full?" cried Mary Merington, jumping up from the hearth-rug, and dropping her favorite fairy-book. She took the bank in both hands and weighed it anxiously, her whole heart in the

effort to judge its value. Surely it was heavy enough now, — there must be two dollars, — more than two dollars!

Side by side on the hearth-rug the two heads, dark and bright, bent over the obstinate little bank, which stubbornly refused to give up the treasure it had held so long.

They shook it, they stood it on its head, — they poked with hat-pins in the slot, — and one by one the reluctant pennies and nickels and dimes dropped out upon the rug.

Eighty — ninety — a dollar — a dollar and — yes, two dollars; ten — fifteen — twenty-five — thirty — and a big round quarter for the last! (How long he had been lurking behind all the rest, to come out grandly, at the very end!) Gray eyes and brown danced with joy; the ruffly dress was certain, now, and the new hair-ribbon, too!

And so it proved. Mary Murray and her mother made the shopping trip to "the Centre," and brought home the ruffly frock in triumph, and a neat little pair of shiny shoes, also, besides

the crisp, wide, white ribbon, to tie up the bonny brown hair.

And when on "Exhibition Day" two hundred children marched through South Berket's Main Street to the South Berket Town Hall, with tap of drums and waving school flags, there was not a prettier nor a happier little maid among them all than Mary Murray.

Mary Merington and her mother sat in the carriage by the common to watch the fluttering white procession pass, and waved their handkerchiefs to the proud leader of the Second District.

"Isn't she lovely, mamma? Oh, aren't you glad?" cried Mary, in incoherent delight and pride. She was looking at the ruffly dress and shiny shoes, but mamma, as she nodded and smiled her sympathy, saw, also, the bright head carried so high and resolutely, and wondered anew what made the child "so different from the rest."

And now it was vacation at last! No more school, for all summer long!

Plenty of housework, to be sure; plenty of running errands and minding Baby Joe, — but much of these could be shared with a devoted friend; and work done in company is almost as good as play.

Little Mike ate so much clover it was a wonder he did not burst, and grew so big that Mamma Merington was almost frightened, sometimes, to see her delicate little daughter leading the pretty creature about with her arm around its neck.

Several times the children saw "their soldier," who came out on Saturday afternoons to go fishing with Larry.

He was always pleasant and friendly with the little girls, sometimes lingering to talk and laugh with them when Larry was impatient to be off.

But still that little sense of regret hovered in Mary Murray's mind. She felt dimly that her brother was not good company for her friend, and she often watched Dick with wistful, anxious eyes that puzzled the careless, good-humored

young fellow. She did not want him to "be like Larry," but she never would tell him, when he asked, what made her look like that; and she never said a word to Mary Merington. There were no puzzles nor worries in *her* happy, love-filled world; and Mary Murray, who loved her, too, would not cast a shadow on its sunshine.

Yet, after all, strange and sad as it seems, the shadow fell at last, and it was Mary Murray herself who brought it there.

It was late one afternoon that the Marys were skipping merrily up the lane, and met Larry coming down.

Mary Merington had always been a little afraid of this big, burly, sullen-looking Murray, though she had seen him very rarely, and he took no notice at all of her. But to-day there was something strange about him that made her shrink still more from meeting him, and wish nervously that there were any other way home. He walked unsteadily, as though he were dizzy, and his face was flushed a dull, dark red. When he saw the children it looked really ugly, and he

stopped them, asking his sister roughly where she was going at that time of night.

Gentle Mary Merington resented his rude tone: she stiffened a little, and felt less timid; and into Mary Murray's brown eyes sprang a little red spark of anger. The other Mary winced again to see it, fearing sharp words; but to her surprise her friend stood stock-still — her little back very straight and head high, as Mary Murray always stood — and answered Larry quietly, though the light was still in her eyes.

But the quiet answer did not appease Larry, for he told her, still more roughly, to come along home where she belonged, and lurching toward her grasped her by the shoulder, — too small a shoulder for so heavy a hand.

Mary Merington stood staring in painful bewilderment. It was amazing! — for still Mary Murray did not flash out in anger, as she had so often seen her do under less provocation. She seemed to shrink together a little under the

rough grasp, and made a movement as though trying to slip out from under his hand.

And then — then Larry struck her! — a brutal, heavy blow on the slender childish shoulder.

It was Mary Merington who screamed, — Mary Merington who flew at him and tried to tear his hand away, forgetting all her fears, and sobbing out her passionate protest, — "Oh, how can you? You are a coward — a coward, to strike a girl!"

It seemed for a moment as though Larry would strike her, too. His scowl as he turned on her was black enough to have terrified an older, braver person. But he had just sense enough not to do that; he only growled at her to mind her own business and go home.

And still Mary Murray did not move, — did not speak! But she turned a very white face toward her friend, and parted her lips just enough to shape the words, "Go! Go!" without a sound.

There was a strange look in her eyes, — a look that somehow made Mary Merington obey her,

even while she told herself wildly that she could not — would not — leave her so!

No wonder she could not understand those eyes! How could a petted, sheltered child know the meaning of such a look? Shame — fear — helpless rage, all blent together. It was a look to break your heart, in a child's eyes.

It drove Mary Merington to do her will, — to slip past them and move up the lane with unwilling, dragging feet, looking backward in a panic of fear for her Mary.

She saw them going slowly toward home, moving unsteadily; and she could see that Larry leaned heavily on the small shoulder that was braced painfully to bear his weight.

When the turn of the lane hid them from sight, she turned and ran toward home. Her heart seemed too heavy for her feet to carry, but with every step her fever of haste increased, until she threw herself upon her mother and sobbed out the dreadful story.

"Oh, mamma, she was *afraid* — Mary was afraid of him! I never saw her afraid of anybody before! And she made me go, and leave her all alone!"

Her mother's eyes were full of tears as she tried to soothe and comfort her. To Mary's wild pleading, "What can we do, mamma? What can we do?" she answered, softly, "Only love her, dear, and make her as happy as we can." But in her heart she, too, was crying, "Poor child! Poor child! What can we do for her?"

CHAPTER XII.

A BIRTHDAY COMING

NEXT morning Mary Merington was posted at the window of the breakfast-room as usual, to watch for Mary Murray and the eggs; but she could not help feeling a little nervous and anxious, until the little egg merchant came in sight, away down the driveway.

Mary Murray waved her hand as usual, and as she came up the steps she flashed her own bright, brown-eyed smile at the welcoming faces above her. She seemed in every way just the same Mary as always, and Mary Merington almost believed that cruel scene in the lane must have been a bad dream of her own.

Later on, however, she did perceive a little

difference, when she found that Mary Murray would not talk about it. When questioned, she said briefly that she "got home all right," and "No, Larry had not — hurt her — again." And that was all that she would say.

So Mary Merington, being sympathetic and tactful, dropped the subject, and both Marys soon seemed to have forgotten it altogether.

But after that, without any talk about it, they rather avoided the lane, and all their playtime was spent in the Merington grounds.

Probably Mamma Merington had more to do with this than they suspected. At least, she was more wonderful than ever in inventing pleasant ways to pass the time; and she played croquet with them, and bought them a set of those pretty grace-hoops, that look so easy, but take your breath away in such an astonishingly short time.

Oh, yes, Mary Murray was happy; it was far the happiest summer she had ever known, although the worries at home did not grow less as the weeks went by.

Dick Saunders came out to fish less often now,

but on the other hand Larry spent much of his time (for work was slack that summer) in the city, and what time he did spend at home was still more uncomfortable for the family than it used to be.

Other friends sometimes came idling down the lane with him, on a Saturday or Sunday, one or two of whom Mary, watching silently from a distance, severely disapproved. She had always disapproved of her brother Larry, more or less, and these rough and idle young fellows, she privately decided, were "much more so" than Larry. She kept carefully out of their way, with Baby Joe.

But once inside the big iron gates of the Merington place, she was free from every care or troubled thought. The place was home to her, but not for the sake of its luxury and beauty; it was the love which she felt in the faces and voices of these new friends, to which she responded with a childish passion of devotion.

And now a new pleasure was coming; so great

a pleasure that Mary 'n' Mary were both a-tip-toe with delightful expectation.

Mary Merington was going to have a birthday party!

It was the first one she had had since she could remember, for something had always prevented. Last summer it was whooping-cough; for two summers before that they had been travelling; and beyond six years old the memories of Mary did not go.

But this was to be a real party, with nine guests, making ten children in all, one for each of the happy, sunny years of her life.

Mary 'n' Mary, — there were two to begin with; three cousins, who would luckily be there at just the right time, stopping over on their way from their summer home on the North Shore to New York, — that made five; and the others would come from the city and its suburbs, winter playmates and school friends of Mary Merington's.

In all this pleasant planning and preparation Mary Murray had her full share. To do or

plan anything without her help would not have occurred nowadays to Mary Merington.

And Mary Murray, — perhaps she felt a little timidity at the idea of so many strange children, — all, too, of such a different world from hers. If she had been simply invited to the party when the time came, I think she would have been too shy, perhaps too proud, to go. But to be in it all beforehand, in all the talking over and getting ready — that was the very pleasantest part of it. Both the Marys felt it to be quite as much her party as the little hostess's herself; and Mamma Merington was secretly surprised to find how really helpful and full of bright ideas the child was.

It was she who suggested the bean-bags, and mamma, remembering how she had enjoyed them in her little-girl days, bought the brightest, gayest-flowered print she could find for covers, and Mary 'n' Mary cheerfully pricked their fingers sewing them up.

At last it was the day before the birthday.

Aunt Adelaide and the cousins were to arrive on the five o'clock train, and stay till the morning after the party.

Before it was nearly time to expect the carriage, Mary was on the watch for the first glimpse of the visitors, down the road.

And so it came about that *their* first glimpse of *her* was one that surprised them very much indeed.

She was standing by the roadside as they approached the gates; the same gentle little Mary they had always known, dainty and delicate in her white frock and long, soft curls. But in her hands was a strong, rough rope, and at the other end of the rope, prancing jerkily on stiff legs, and shaking her lowered head in alarming playfulness, was what the cousins called, in startled chorus, "a cow!"

In fact, it was Mike, who by this time was almost big enough to be called a heifer, at least, and had a sharp little pair of horns of her own, which she was only too ready to use in a frolic.

Mary and Mike had been having a merry time together while they waited, and now Mary uncon-

sciously pulled this astonishing pet along with her as she ran to meet and kiss her cousins, who, on their part, were not at all anxious to meet Mike.

"For mercy's sake, child, keep that beast away!" cried Aunt Adelaide; and the twins, Elizabeth and Elinor, who had jumped from the carriage, shrieked and fled as Mary approached them full of eager affection.

But Rodney, the boy, laughed. He was two years older than his sisters, and he had expected, privately, to be badly bored by this "girls' affair." Now he was not so sure of it.

He kissed Mary heartily, then got hold of the rope and gave her a chance to greet and reassure the frightened twins.

Taking this for an introduction, Mike lowered those sharp little horns and butted him, in a friendly way; and it was the girls' turn to laugh when little Mary had to run to his rescue.

Just at this point Mike's owner appeared, running up the road in search of the bossy just as on the day when the two Marys first met, — but what a difference now!

They all turned, as Mary Merington hailed her joyously, and watched her with much curiosity as she came toward the carriage. She was a splendid child, with her vivid coloring, straight, vigorous little body, and clear, straightforward look.

Mary Merington introduced her "best friend" prettily, first to Aunt Adelaide and then to the cousins.

Rod looked her square in the eyes, shook hands, and decided she was "a good fellow;" but his sisters looked her over a little cautiously. They were rather worldly-wise little people, compared to their cousin Mary, and they wondered who she was, and *what* she was, — this girl who played with horned cattle on the highway.

But Aunt Adelaide was impatient to go on. (She, too, felt a little doubtful of the strange

playmate, and intended to make inquiries when she reached the house.)

So they parted from Mary Murray and Mike, and the other four children were all crowded into the carriage, somehow, for the short remainder of the trip.

Aunt Adelaide made her inquiries that evening, while the bedtime romp, up-stairs, was at its height. I doubt, myself, whether she was very well satisfied with the information she obtained. At least, it was in a very protesting voice that she exclaimed at the end of the talk, "But, May, the child seems to be absolutely running wild!"

Mamma Merington's eyes and thoughts were partly on the nursery riot, which she was enjoying as much as the young folks; so she only smiled, and answered, absently, "Yes, — yes, I believe she is, now. At first, I was afraid she wouldn't."

"May Merington! What *do* you mean?" cried Aunt Adelaide, amazed.

Then Mamma Merington laughed, and explained.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BIRTHDAY MORNING

Not even Mary Merington, dear child as she was, could have deserved a brighter, lovelier birthday than that next morning.

At a much earlier hour than usual she came pattering barefoot through the dressing-room to claim her birthday kisses from father and mother.

She got the kisses, — full measure of them, and perhaps a few extra ones thrown in. And also, after a grand romping frolic with papa, she pounced upon and captured the little white velvet box under his pillow, which he pretended to be hiding so carefully.

"Oh, me, oh, my!" she sighed, with perfect happiness as she opened it, "I didn't know what

it was I wanted the most of anything, but this is it!" And she clasped the string of little gold beads around her neck, over the frills of her nightgown, and perched herself at her mother's dressing-glass to enjoy the effect.

Only mamma's suggestion that it was nearly time for Mary Murray and the eggs induced her at last to run back to her own room, in a hurry to dress and go down to show her treasure.

Then came a squeal of fresh rapture; for during the frolic mamma had slipped away, and smuggled her own gift into Mary's room.

There it was, laid out on the bureau, a lovely, "grown-up" set, of ivory, just like mamma's own, only that the monogram on brushes and boxes was of ruby red enamel instead of gold.

The pleasure of using the pretty things hastened her toilet considerably, and presently she was ready to run down and watch for Mary, the precious gold beads clasped above her simple little morning suit of blue linen.

But on the veranda a little disappointment was waiting to sober her high spirits.

It stood — the disappointment — on a piazza chair, placed carefully before the door to insure attention. It was a little round basket, carefully covered with a red napkin, and under the napkin were three large, brown eggs. No word, no sign, but this. Mary Murray had come and gone!

"Why, why do you suppose, mamma?" grieved Mary Merington. "And on my birthday, too, just think! Why didn't she wait and see my beads, and brush and combs and things?"

And mamma, sorry to see even a little cloud on the bright day, thought at once of a dozen good reasons for this unusual haste; and finally allowed her to go and wake up Elinor and Elizabeth, to divert her mind.

The diversion was so successful that at last it took the assistance and persuasion of two mothers to get all the shoes and hair-ribbons tied in time for breakfast.

Elinor and Elizabeth were full of merry

hints, that their mother tried in vain to check, about their birthday gifts. Mary could not

make out why, if there were gifts, they were not forthcoming at once; but she was quite content to wait and let the pleasant mystery solve itself "by and by," as they assured her that it would. These rarely seen cousins were pleasure enough for the present.

Nevertheless, she did not forget Mary Murray. All through the gay chatter of the breakfast-table, and the pleasant excitement of showing her cousins about the place afterward, the gray eyes kept glancing down the driveway, on the watch for the "best friend," and what Mary Murray did, and what Mary Murray said, came into the talk so often that one could hardly blame the girl cousins for feeling a little pique.

They were nice children, and they said nothing that was not nice; but somehow their questions about Mary Murray — her home, her family, her circumstances — made her loyal friend feel uncomfortable without knowing why.

"Circumstances" had never entered her head before. She had taken Mary Murray's surroundings as a matter of course, just as she did her own. But though she did not understand, she could feel that her friend was being disparaged, and her face grew sober, and her replies were carefully polite and serious.

At last, however, when the visitors proposed exploring the pine grove on the hill, and their hostess demurred on the ground that Mary Murray might come while they were gone, Elinor's patience gave way a little.

"But can't we do a single thing till 'Mary Murray' comes?" she asked, half laughing but half petulant. "Why must everything wait for her?"

Mary turned and looked straight into her cousin's face, her gray eyes darkening a trifle. "Because," she said, very gently and distinctly, "Mary Murray is my best friend, and I love her best of any one in the world, except mamma and papa."

"Good for you, Mary! Stick up for your

friends!" said Rodney, joining in the talk unexpectedly. He had said little until now; Rodney never did say much, and he had found the stables and garden and grounds interesting enough without paying much attention to the girls' chatter. So his sudden backing surprised and embarrassed Mary almost as much as it did his sister, who hastened to change the subject, though she wore an aggrieved air for awhile.

But they all understood very clearly. When Mary Merington said "best friend" she meant exactly that; and Mary Murray was to be accepted for what she was and as she was.

Rodney turned back to give Mary a handful of blackberries, and helped her over the stone wall very carefully. He liked this little cousin. He began to think she was a "good fellow," too, small and gentle as she was.

Just then, when the children all felt a little constrained, came the sudden relief of Mary's joyful cry, "There she is!"

Yes, there came Mary Murray, hurrying up the drive, flushed with haste, but smiling and eager.

The other Mary ran to meet her, and the cousins followed, all glad of the diversion, and rather grateful to Mary Murray for making her appearance at just the right minute.

So perhaps they welcomed her the more cordially on that account; but in any case she would not have noticed any lack, she was so pleasantly absorbed in her errand.

She had brought her birthday gift to Mary Merington.

Mary received the little brown paper parcel with delight, and stopped to kiss the giver before she untied the string. Then, "Oh, you *dear!*" she cried. "How pretty! how *pretty!*"

And it was pretty, — a little slender vase of clear plain glass, with a wavy, petal-like flare at the top.

Mary Murray stood quite silent while the others examined and praised it, her brown eyes shining with happiness as they watched the pleasure in the gray eyes. She had been waiting many days for this moment.

It had happened a week or two before, that while the two Marys were playing in Mary Merington's room, a little china vase, much prized and cherished, had been dropped and broken; and Mary Merington had cried.

It was the first time (excepting that terrible day in Dark Swamp) that Mary Murray had ever seen her new friend in trouble; and her loving heart was filled with a passion of sympathy and longing to make it up to her. And day by day ever since, she had planned and saved and counted her pennies, till this very morning she had found she had enough for her purpose.

It was a happy moment for both the Marys.

Gray-eyed Mary ran up the steps to show the pretty present to her mother; and brown-eyed Mary followed rather shyly at Mamma Merington's call and smile.

Mamma and Aunt Adelaide were both pleased with the vase, and praised it warmly; but for some reason Aunt Adelaide seemed to be surprised, too. She raised her eyebrows at mamma,

and shaped the word "taste" with her lips; and mamma answered with a smiling, triumphant little nod. *She* was not surprised that Mary Murray should have "taste."

None of the children saw this by-play but Elinor. She understood it; and thereafter she regarded both the vase and its giver with much more respect.

Mamma put her arm around Mary Murray with a motherly squeeze. "Where did you find it, dear?" she asked. "I didn't know there was such a pretty thing in Berket."

"It was in the big store at the Centre. I saw it ever so long ago, — when I got my dress, you know. I thought it was pretty. So I went this morning, and it wasn't sold: wasn't that lucky?"

"But, Mary! Why, dear child, you don't mean you have been to Berket Centre and back this morning, in all this heat?"

That was just what Mary had done: that was why she had brought the eggs so early, and had

hurried away without the little morning visit she so dearly enjoyed.

Mamma did not say much; but she kissed the hot cheeks, and kept Mary beside her a little while, to get cool and rested, before the children carried her off to see the preparations for the party.

There were the flowers, everywhere, and the games, laid out ready. It took some time to see them all, and when the children came out-doors again to escort Mary Murray to the gate, it was Aunt Adelaide herself who suggested that Mary should stay to luncheon, and save going home.

"Oh, no, ma'am, I couldn't," said the little girl, simple and frank as always. "You know I must be home to mind Joe, while mother gets dinner. And besides," she added, with a little smile of anticipation, "I have to put on my party dress!" (It was funny that Aunt Ade-

laide, of all people, should have forgotten that!) "But I will come back just as soon as the dishes are washed," Mary promised.

So they had to let her go.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

MARY must have been a very fast dish-washer, for in an incredibly short time after luncheon she appeared again, this time in festal array, — the shiny little shoes, the ruffly dress, and the big white bow to crown the burnished copper mass of her hair.

"Something peculiar, — noticeable, — about her," Aunt Adelaide said there was, and it was quite true; but what Mamma Merington noticed chiefly was the quick, wistful look of inquiry that met her eyes, seeking approval; and her motherly smile in return gave it heartily.

And Mary Merington, — her fond pride was like a mother's, too. Her affection for her friend and her feeling of intimate, joint possessorship of the pretty ruffly frock were mingled in a sense

of perfect satisfaction. To her, Mary Murray was the best part of her party.

It almost seemed as though she were to the other children, also. She did not *mean* to take the lead, nor was she conscious of doing it; but she was so brimful of life and brightness and invention that it nearly always happened so, wherever she was.

Mamma had intended to see that the children were occupied and amused while they waited for the arrival of the other half of the party; but before she knew it the new bean-bags were out, and all five were so busy and so gay that they forgot to watch the road till they fairly heard the carriage wheels on the driveway. Then there was a merry race, bean-bags and all, to meet and welcome the newcomers.

Four girls there were, and one boy, invited on Rodney's account.

Each guest brought a mysterious little parcel of some sort; and in the confusion of greetings and introductions these were smuggled into mamma's hands and out of sight, right under the

birthday Mary's unconscious little nose. She had quite forgotten that feature of birthdays by now, and noticed nothing.

They began at once with their favorite outdoor games. Mary 'n' Mary had had their heads together days beforehand over the programme, and there was certainly variety enough to please everybody.

There were the good old ring games, — "Hunt the handkerchief," and "Hunt the squirrel through the woods," and "Here we go round the barberry bush," in which Mary Murray must be the leader, because she could always think of funny new things to do.

Then Mary's own favorite "Duck on a rock" had its turn, and the two boys were rather surprised to find that she could throw as straight and run as fast as either of them. In fact, the other girls presently dropped out and left those three to play it out together, while mamma taught the rest some of the old, old games that she used to

play, — and I suppose her grandmother before her, for they must be a hundred years old at least, — like "London Bridge is falling down," and "I'm going to Lady Washington's, to buy a cup of tea."

When they were too warm and tired to run and shout any more, there was the croquet set ready; and then a tray appeared, filled with little cups of cold, rosy sherbet, and they all dropped down on the broad stone steps to sip, and fan themselves, and consider what to do next.

Mamma settled the question by bringing out a paper bag, and asking who would be "it" for "Japanese Hide-and-seek."

It was Rod's turn; and they were all very much puzzled and curious when she began to fill his pockets with rice from the bag!

Then she explained that it was just like a paper chase, except that he was to scatter the rice instead of paper scraps. This would make it harder to

find him, so the children begged Rodney to use plenty of the rice; and then they went indoors to give him three minutes' start.

Then the chase began. Little folks' eyes are wonderfully quick, and they followed the pearly grains over the gravel and through the short grass very much faster than mamma or Aunt Adelaide could have done it!

Rodney had thought himself quite safe among the thick, bushy branches of a little copper beech-tree; but it was not five minutes before he was discovered and pulled down in triumph.

Then the other boy, Gilbert, wanted to try. He had an idea that he thought very funny, and he chuckled over it as he made two new rules for the game. First, he must be tagged in order to be considered caught; and secondly, Rodney was not to play!

That young gentleman naturally objected; but when Gilbert whispered his plan, Rodney seemed even more amused than himself, and laughed till the little girls were quite indignant.

Gilbert scattered his rice so lavishly that they

Edith Foster

followed with hardly a check, straight to the boundary wall, — over it, and along to the left, — and then they saw the joke!

There was Gilbert, not hidden at all; *but* — he sat with his back against the wall, and close in front of him lay a pretty Jersey heifer, serenely chewing her cud. He thought they wouldn't dare!

Well, he was partly right. Most of the girls did fall back in dismay, with little screams and laughter and reproaches of "no fair!"

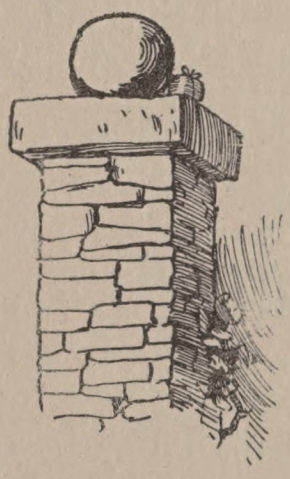
But two of them — and one the smallest and most timid of all — did nothing of the kind. One simply hopped over Mike, and the other actually knelt on top of her, and reached over; and they both tagged him, at the same moment!

Rod had followed on, of course, and everybody but Gilbert enjoyed that joke of his immensely; but he picked himself up out of the blackberry-vines quite crestfallen and disappointed. He protested that they were not the right kind of girls at all if they were not afraid of cows; and

then the two threw their arms around Mike's neck and kissed her, to prove it.

"But it was a shame not to invite her to my party! She shall come now!" Mary Merington declared; and they led her in on the lawn, and even persuaded the visitors to stroke her smooth little nose, and admire her big, soft eyes. So Mike was a spectator of all the gay doings, after that.

The last game they played was one that mamma had invented herself. She called it "Birthday hide-and-seek," and it was a grand general hunt for Mary's birthday presents.



They were anywhere, everywhere, all over the place, — under the rose-bushes, behind the garden seats, up on top of the high, stone gate-posts, — in every sort of place, in fact, that mamma and Rod could think of. And when and how they had put them there was the greatest mystery of all.

Each successful hunter announced his discovery

by a joyful shout; and when they found other names than Mary's written on the dainty ribbon-tied parcels, the hunt grew still more merry and eager.

When all the bundles had been collected in a large flat basket on the steps, there were some pretty souvenirs for each, besides the gifts that her cousins and guests had brought for Mary.

It was the best fun of the day, they all said; but while they were still examining, admiring, and discussing, they were called into the dining-room.

And that birthday table! It made Mary Murray think of the fancies she used to have about the "fairy little girl" who lived in the great house; for this was fairy food, surely. Never had she even dreamed of ice-cream shaped and colored like roses and water-lilies, or tiny cakes, frosted with pink and green and white, and trimmed with pearls and silver beads!

The ten birthday candles were pink and green and white, too, and so was everything on the dainty table, which mamma had made as beautiful as it could be for a grand, grown-up party.

After that they were all willing to play more quietly, on the wide, cool veranda; and presently they were astonished to see the carriage come around to take the visitors to the station. The sun was getting low, and the lovely party must come to an end at last.

They stood, the house party, on the steps, waving and calling good-bys till the carriage was out of sight down the drive: then they sat down in a happy tired row on the lowest step, to "talk it over," which is another of the best things about a party.

But soon Mary Murray grew uneasy: the real, every-day world, with its cares, was coming back to her, and she regretfully announced that she must get Mike, and go home.

I think by this time they were all very nearly as sorry to lose her as Mary Merington herself; and even Elinor urged that it was not so very late. But Mary was firm (as usual),

so they all walked down to the gate to see her off.

But it was rather later than usual, and Mike knew it. She was eager to go; and when they untied her she pulled on the rope so hard, and danced around her little mistress so wildly, that it was all Mary could do to hold her. So Rodney offered to lead her home, lest the ruffly gown should come to grief through her antics; and they set off, Rod and the bossy revolving around Mary Murray, and the others watching them, laughing, till they were out of sight.

Then Mary Merington and the twins turned slowly back toward the house, feeling that now the party was really over.

They had nearly reached the steps, when Elinor said, suddenly, "Where are your beads, Mary? Did you take them off?"

Poor Mary! Her hands flew to her throat, and her eyes grew wide with fright.

They were gone, — her precious beads, — dearest of all her birthday gifts!

She was too frightened to speak, and Elizabeth

was ready to cry in sympathy; but Elinor was made of sterner stuff. "They are down inside," she declared. "Stand up and jump!" But this did not produce the beads.

Then she almost choked Mary, feeling inside her collar for them; but no, — it was only too evident that the clasp had parted, and the beads were lying somewhere in the grass and leaves, — but where?

They ran back to the gate and hunted over every foot of the way to the house. Then they ran in to tell the mothers, who both came out at once to help them search.

Nobody could remember when she had last seen the beads on Mary's neck; and where had she not been, during all the afternoon games — especially that "Birthday hide-and-seek!" She had poked her little nose into every flower and shrub, and been in and out of every nook and corner of the grounds.

They comforted and reassured the poor child

all they could, and began the hunt. When Rod came back, he joined it with enthusiasm, and so did John and two of the maids.

They searched until dark, but it was no use, and they had to give it up till morning.

CHAPTER XV.

FOUND — WHERE?

BRIGHT and early next day, when Mary Murray came with her little egg basket, she found the children scattered over the lawn hunting in the grass, and the sad story was poured out to her by all four at once.

Mary was almost as much distressed as the tearful little "best friend." She forgot eggs and breakfast at home and everything else, and devoted herself to the search with the others, until mamma came out to call them all in.

"Now we are not going to hunt any more," she said, with a comforting arm around her Mary. "Those beads are going to be found, and we won't give it up till they are! but now we will just forget all about it, and have a good time while we are together." And a little extra

squeeze of the consoling arm made it clear to Mary that she must not let her guests be uncomfortable about her trouble while they stayed.

The little girl responded bravely to the hint. They all had a gay breakfast together, and then the children went up to the pine grove (where they had not been the afternoon before), and no one could have told that the little hostess had not really forgotten.

But when aunt and cousins were all gone to take the forenoon train for New York the beads came uppermost in her thoughts once more, and she and mamma went over the garden again together, very thoroughly.

That afternoon Mary Murray came again and hunted with her, eagerly and anxiously. But not even her bright eyes could win in this last sad game of hide-and-seek, and Mary 'n' Mary parted soberly at the bossy's tree, each earnestly assuring the other that the beads would certainly be found to-morrow.

It must have been two hours later, — it was

growing dark, and Mary Merington was sitting with father and mother, very quiet and peaceful, on the veranda, while papa smoked his evening cigar, — when Mary Murray came running up the driveway at the top of her speed.

They all turned to meet her in surprise, for she had never been there so late before; and as she came up the steps it was plain that something very serious had brought her.

The child was gasping so for breath that she could not answer when they spoke to her; but she walked straight up to Mary and held out her hand. There lay the gold beads!

"Oh, my beads! you dear, — you dear! Oh, I am so happy!" cried Mary Merington, delighted. She kissed and hugged her best friend and danced for joy, clasping the necklace to her breast. "Where were they?" she demanded, eagerly.

Mary Murray would not take the chair they offered her: her breath was coming back, but as the flush of running faded from her face it left it very white. She did not look so straight into

their eyes as usual, but kept her face turned a little aside, and seemed nervously impatient to be gone.

To Mary's repeated question, she answered only, "I found them," which sounded rather strange even to Mary, and the elders glanced at each other, as if to say, here was something to be explained.

"I found them," she repeated, stubbornly, and Mary Merington looked mystified and troubled. Why did not Mary Murray rejoice with her? And what was there to be so secret about?

Then mamma spoke, very gently, for it was plain that the little girl was in a painfully wrought up state of feeling of some sort.

"What is the trouble, dear? Why won't you tell us? Were they in the road?"

Then Mary did turn, and looked at her with Mary's own brave, honest eyes. "I just found them: isn't that enough to tell?" she asked, pleadingly, and her voice shook.

But mamma had not waited for the answer: she was staring at her as though frightened.

"Mary, Mary, child!" she cried out. "What *is* the matter?" and then the others looked and saw it, too.

Half across the averted cheek and temple was a great, bluish-purple mark, — a great, cruel bruise!

The tears rose instantly to Mary's eyes as they exclaimed and gathered around her, and her chin twitched painfully; but she shut her mouth tightly and shook her head in silence to all their questions.

At last she said, "Please let me go! *Please* don't make me say anything!" so piteously that they had to give it up and be content with thanking her.

Mamma would have made her come in and have the ugly bruise bathed and tended, but Mary would not wait. Yes, she would bathe it herself, — with hot water, — yes, very hot; she would do anything they said, but she must go home!

And while they glanced at each other and hesitated whether to press her further, she ran down the steps and slipped away into the dusk.

They talked it over sorrowfully, sitting there in the darkness, lit only by the glowing red tip of the cigar.

The bruise and the beads belonged together: so much was certain. And Mary was either afraid or ashamed to tell how she came by either.

It seemed to follow that the purple mark had not been caused by a fall or any accident — it was a blow: and on this point Mary Merington had no doubts whatever.

"It was that Larry! I *know* it was Larry!" she declared, fiercely. "Nobody else would be so unkind! But, oh dear, why does he treat her so? Can't we make him stop it?"

Then papa spoke. (He had let his cigar go out.)

"When you chased Gilbert down to that place where the calf was tied," he began, very slowly and thoughtfully, "you climbed over the stone wall, you said, didn't you? And then through

the bushes into the road? M-h-m. And then you came around by the road and through the gates home. That was about four o'clock? Yes, — and about half an hour later, as I came up from the station, I passed this precious brother

Larry on the road, walking toward home. Now I think we have got it straightened out."

"Oh, I see! I see!" cried Mary. "Larry found it, and Mary saw him have it and tried to make him give it to her, and he struck her; but she got it and ran here! Oh, *isn't* Mary splendid! But can't we do something to Larry, papa, to make him stop?"

Papa did not see how they could, without making more trouble for Mary. They had no case against him without her evidence. "But I'd give something — something handsome," he added, emphatically, "to induce that young gentleman to leave this neighborhood."

"That's an idea, Robert!" mamma broke in. "Do let us try it. Write to your brother, and find him a place in New York. Why didn't we think of it while Adelaide was here?"

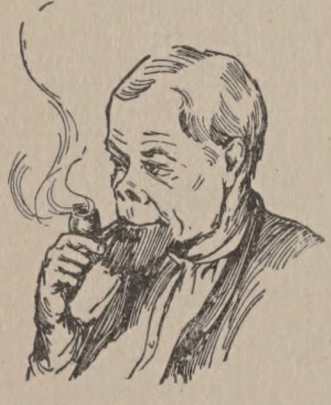
"Gently, gently," papa answered, laughing. "We mustn't go too fast! If Brother Larry gets an idea how much we value his absence, he may put too high a price on it. But we'll see what we can do."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE STORMY NIGHT

Poor Mary Murray! There were a good many things she did not tell her "best friend" in the days that followed.

Life was not pleasant in the Murray house nowadays, and Baby Joe was the only person in it who found much to laugh at.



There had been many violent quarrels lately between Larry and his father, about Larry's habits, and the friends he brought to the house; and these unhappy scenes kept them all stirred up and uneasy.

And on the top of all had come the affair of the necklace, which made things worse yet; for Larry bitterly resented his sister's interference with his actions, and he neither forgave nor for-

got. He had paid her the compliment of storming at her quite as though she were his own age, and had finally flung himself out of the house swearing that she should repent her meddling. And Mary had no reason to disbelieve him.

But it was not for herself she feared; for worst of all had been the dark hint of some revenge which was to fall, not on her, but on the friends she loved best.

What did he mean? If he should touch a hair of Mary Merington's head! — Mary Murray would wake and listen and tremble in the night. Her eyes grew big and her cheeks were getting thin with the strain of it.

She saw very little of Larry. He was off with his friends for days and nights together; and indeed that was the pleasantest thing he did for his family in those days.

Once Mary saw him on the street, and Dick Saunders was with him, or so she thought. Her heart went out to the cheery, friendly young fellow, and she longed to run to meet him. But two things held her back: she was afraid of

Larry, and — how could she let Dick see that ugly mark on her temple, that faded out so slowly? The child felt the disgrace of it almost as if she had been a woman.

So she watched her kind friend from a distance, with a sore heart, and turned away without going nearer.

Soon after this there was a heavy rain-storm in the night. The dull, steady drumming of the rain was like a lullaby to warm, comfortable folk, and up at the great house everybody was asleep and dreaming happily.

Suddenly, in the middle of the night, came a wild peal of the front door-bell, — a long, frantic ringing that clattered through the house, up-stairs and down!

In a moment the whole place was astir. The electric lights flashed up everywhere; Mary sprang up in her bed, only half-awake but wholly frightened, and screamed for her mother; a door slammed somewhere with a crash of broken glass,

and the maids came running to the upper stairs.

Papa Merington had turned on the lights in the halls, and pressed sharply the bell that rang in the stables. What happened next, poor little bewildered Mary had no idea: but through the dark dressing-room between she could hear confused noises and voices, either in her parents' room or in the sitting-room, beyond. The maids were on the stairs, now, and Ellen, the nervous one, was screaming wildly. Then Andrews, the coachman, came running through the lower hall from the back door, and rushed up-stairs, calling as he came to know where the fire was.

In the midst of all the alarm and confusion Mary wondered (she was, perhaps, the only one who thought of it) who had rung the door-bell, and if any one were answering it. No one seemed to be. They were all collected, apparently, in the sitting-room, and all talking, or screaming, at once.

At last mamma came, turning on the lights in the dressing-room and Mary's chamber, and put

her arms around the terrified child. "It's all over, dear, — there is no danger: they are all gone now," she soothed and petted.

"Isn't the house on fire?" quavered Mary.

"No, dear, no; it wasn't fire," her mother said. And then, as gently as she could, she explained that they had been awakened to find burglars in the next room, "mamma's room," as the children called it; and that papa had caught and struggled with one of them, but could not hold him. He and the men were out-of-doors now, looking for traces of the thieves, and she had telephoned for the constable at South Berket.

Then she put on Mary's warm little wadded silk dressing-gown and slippers, and let her go in to see the havoc their night visitors had made; for going to sleep again was out of the question, of course.

The maids were all gathered in the sitting-room, gazing at the broken window and overturned furniture, and chattering

hysterically. The coolest of them helped mamma to close the shutters, and hang a blanket before the broken sash: and then made up a fire in the grate.

And then papa came hurrying up the stairs, with something in his arms that he brought in and set on the floor before the fire.

It was Mary Murray! And she was a forlorn and astonishing spectacle! Her head was bare; her feet were bare; she wore her red flannel petticoat, and her blue gingham frock was huddled around her shoulders in the manner of a shawl. And from head to foot, frock, petticoat, and hair, she was soaked and drenched with rain!

"It was this child," said papa, almost solemnly, "who rang the bell! And she did it to warn us that the burglars were in the house. Now get brandy, and hot water, and see if you can save her from a fit of sickness."

They all fell upon her then. Never was a

reluctant little heroine so praised and pitied and exclaimed over and worried over!

It did more to bring the frightened women to their senses than anything else could have done; and in a wonderfully short time they got her into a hot bath, and then into Mary Merington's own little white bed, with a hot-water bottle at her feet, and something hotter still, and very disagreeable, to drink.

She smiled at them gratefully and drowsily, for the hot things made her sleepy; but for all their questions they got absolutely nothing out of her, — not even Mr. Barstow, the constable, when he came. He was a big, fierce-looking person, who thought the way to persuade information out of people was to threaten little girls with bugaboos. He did not know Mary Murray!

"Well, it doesn't matter much: don't worry her any more now," said Papa Merington to him, aside. "You can see she is not in a condition for it. We are sure of one, anyway. I know Larry Murray; I got a good look at him,

as he broke away from me and crashed through that window. I'll swear to him, fast enough, and the rest are his chums, of course."

So at last they all went out and left her, in the dim, warm, fragrant room. And mamma took her own Mary into her own bed for what was left of the night.

The hunt went on, out-of-doors, but it drew farther and farther away; and the disturbed household subsided into quiet, to get what sleep it could.

CHAPTER XVII.

A "SPUNKY CHILD"

MARY MURRAY slept long and heavily. A dozen times, at least, before and after breakfast, Mary Merington tiptoed across her mother's dressing-room, to peep through the half-closed door, and feast her eyes on the delightful vision of her beloved Mary asleep in her bed.

At last her affectionate patience was rewarded, for the gray eyes met the brown eyes just as they opened, still full of dreams, in a vague, wondering stare. Mary Murray thought she must be dreaming yet. This was not her little, sloping-walled bedroom, — and where was Baby Joe? Then it all came back to her, and she sat up quickly, and met the eager kiss with a dozen anxious questions?

Mamma came in when she heard them talking, and then they had a funny time getting Mary Murray dressed; for she had not had half her clothes on, when she arrived. But the other Mary's things all proved to be just right, excepting the ones that were a little too tight across the chest and shoulders. "Anything that is a Mary!" said mamma, merrily; and presently Mary 'n' Mary looked like a pair of twins, dressed just alike except that one pretty linen frock was blue and the other gray.

There must have been three Marys that morning, instead of the usual two, for certainly there were two of Mary Murray. One of these moved in a pleasant daze, deeply enjoying the comfort and petting, and the novelty of "going visiting" in this unexpected fashion; while the other one was not only hiding the trouble in her heart, but was also conscious of a dull, heavy, achey feeling in her head and limbs which surprised her greatly, — for Mary Murray had never been ill in her life.

But the nervous strain she had been under for

so many days, capped by the shock and exposure of last night, had been too much for her. When they were ready to go down-stairs, she stood uncertainly for a moment, moving her feet slightly as though to keep her balance; and then mamma saw, and sprang and caught her just in time, as she was falling.

"What was it? What ails me?" she said, a moment later, in great surprise. "I couldn't see things plain, and the floor wobbled up and down!"

But she would not go back to bed, so they made her lie on the couch in mamma's room, where the fresh morning fire was glowing and purring (for the air was crisp after the storm); and then a dainty white tray appeared, with a

dainty little breakfast on it; and Mary Merington hovered over her like "a hen with one chicken" while she ate.

But the sight of the nicely poached egg reminded her of something.

"Oh dear!" she said, distressfully, "your father didn't have his eggs for breakfast! I never thought of them till this very minute."

"Well, he had beefsteak," said Mary Merington, practically. "Here he comes now. You aren't hungry, are you, papa?"

Papa assured them that he was not. He kissed both Marys, quite impartially, and then he picked up a magazine and settled himself in a big chair near the fire.

It was necessary, of course, to find out all that Mary Murray could tell of the attempted robbery; but papa and mamma had agreed that it was no use either to try to frighten her, as the constable had done, or to urge her into obstinacy. They remembered that Mary Murray was "spunky." So they decided to simply talk it over with her, and so lead her into telling them what she could, naturally and willingly.

Accordingly, papa held up the magazine before him, and threw in a casual word or question now and then, while the others chatted quietly.

Mary Murray suspected nothing of the little

plot. For all she knew, gentlemen who did not drive teams for Mr. McGowan made a practice of sitting in their wives' "up-stairs parlors," reading magazines at ten o'clock in the morning. And she was quite ready to talk, on all points save one. There her "spunk" came into play.

The others assumed and referred to Larry's part in the affair quite as a matter of course, — an accepted fact, like the rain-storm. Starting on this basis, it was easy to gather, bit by bit, Mary's story of the night, — how she had been wakened by the slight noise of pebbles thrown against Larry's window, and, ready as she was nowadays to take alarm, had strained her ears in vain to catch the whispering; how she had knelt, shivering, at her own window, and seen them cross the wall, and start across lots in the direction she feared.

Then, not waiting to dress, she had slipped out and raced desperately up the lane and around

by the road, knowing that the others must go slowly and cautiously through the pine grove and past the stables, and hoping to reach the house before them. Not seeing or hearing them at first, she believed she had succeeded, and rang the bell with all her force. But the instant alarm and confusion that followed, with the escape of the robbers from inside the house, had alarmed her in her turn; and the searchers found her crouching on the veranda, waiting for a chance to steal away unseen.

All this she told willingly enough, but when they touched, ever so gently, on the one important point, she "went into her shell like a turtle," as papa declared to himself. She would not say who was with Larry, or even how many, or whether she had seen their faces. In fact, she herself never mentioned even Larry's name, hopeless as further concealment now was.

She spoke her own sentiments freely enough, and expressed her indignation at the "meanness" of stealing from people who had never done anything bad to *them*, quite from the standpoint

of the sternest justice. And yet justice seemed not to have been in Mary Murray's thoughts the night before. On the contrary, her motive appeared to have been mercy to all parties concerned.

"I thought," she explained, "that if I could just ring and ring, till you all woke up, before they got here, then when they found you were awake, they would go away again: and so *you* would be all right, and *they* would be all right, too, and you would never know who it was ringing. But I didn't get here soon enough," she added, sadly. "But I ran as fast as I could."

She had, indeed, poor child! But the men were already in the house when she reached it, so she was too late to save them from the crime, though still, with her obstinate reticence, she was striving to save them from the consequences of it.

"But I can't see for the life of me," mused papa, in an undertone, to himself and the fire, "why she should be so anxious to shield that brute of a brother!"

Just then he glanced up, and caught his daughter's eye fixed upon him. She had overheard. The eye sparkled with a sudden inspiration, and her delicate little brows were puckered into a frown of awful intelligence as she silently beckoned him toward the door.

He nodded assent, and in a twinkling they had slipped into the hall, and Mary was pulling him down by his coat lapels to whisper in his ear.

"Don't you see, papa, it isn't Larry she is trying to hide? She knows that we know all about *him*, now, and still she won't talk. It is somebody else; and I know who!"

Then she told him the story of Dick Saunders; the part she knew and the part she had guessed, — which made pretty much the whole; for though Mary Murray had been silent about the things that worried her, her friend's eyes and wits were sharpened both by her love for Mary herself,

and her own interest in "our soldier." So the things Mary Murray had not told, — the gradual stopping of her pleasant stories of his visits, the troubled frown when Mary Merington asked questions, and one or two reluctant answers, — these hints had given the loving, clever little wits quite enough to go upon.

Mary Merington, too, was grieved for Dick; but while the other Mary's grief kept her silent, hers drove her straight to papa, with full faith that he would make it all right, somehow.

"You won't do anything to Dick, will you, papa?" she begged. "You see we are *so* fond of him, and it would break both of our hearts."

"But she is breaking hers, already," papa answered, gravely; "for she knows now that Dick is bad, and she knows, too, that she is doing wrong to conceal it. Don't you see, Marykin, that we can't let Mary Murray do wrong if we can help it, and we

mustn't let your soldier go on doing wrong, either — for her sake, and his sake, and for the sake of all the other people he might harm. And if we did we should be doing wrong, too, so I might say, for all our sakes. See, Marykin?"

They were rather big ideas for ten years old, but Mary knew papa was always right, and she did her docile though half-tearful best to understand, and to assent to them.

CHAPTER XVIII.

NOT MARY MURRAY, AT ALL!

However, poor Mary Murray had already been excited too much for her immediate good, and papa decided to follow up the new clue "without plaguing the poor little thing any more just now."

So, later that morning, an officer from Berket went to the city and visited the wholesale warehouse, where Dick Saunders was trying to make himself valuable to his employers.

The officer returned to Berket disappointed, with scant satisfaction; but his visit had an unexpected result: for about ten minutes after the next train had stopped at the South Berket station, a mile away, an earnest and indignant

young militiaman was pressing the bell which Mary Murray had rung so wildly a few hours before, and demanding to see Mr. Merington.

That interview was much more satisfactory to both parties than the Berket policeman's had been. It would have been hard to look in Dick Saunders's honest, indignant eyes and disbelieve him; and indeed Mr. Merington was very willing and glad to believe.

"No, *sir!*" Dick declared, "I got sick of that gang and quit, a good while ago. I used to like Larry Murray, but I can't stand the fellows he goes with now. If a fellow is trying to make something of himself, that sort of thing won't do! No, he didn't come to see me in town. I don't know where he went; but if he was with that crowd, I can guess, pretty well. He hasn't been near me for a month."

So Mary Murray had been mistaken, and all her trouble and grief on his account had been for nothing!

No, not quite for nothing, I think; for though Papa Merington knew nothing of that fancied

glimpse of him which had confirmed Mary's fears, he knew the rest, through his own Mary's help; and he told Dick Saunders the story,— how the child had tried to shield him, and had repelled and resisted the friends she loved best for his sake.

And Dick's face flushed, and the smart in his eyes and the little hot feeling in his breast were the kind of feelings that do a boy good, though he doesn't know it.

"Well, Mr. Saunders," said Papa Merington at last, shaking hands heartily, "I am as glad as you are to have this cleared up! I'm glad you came straight to me. Now I guess we can get the truth out of the child, when we've set her heart at rest on your account; and we'll put that chuckle-headed constable on a new track, if we haven't lost too much time. Now, would you like to see these staunch little friends of yours?"

And Dick blushed again, and said he would.

Mary Murray was still there, for they had not felt willing yet to send her home, although she was feeling nearly all right again.

The joyful news which Papa Merington brought up-stairs completed her recovery, and Mary 'n' Mary raced down to the library with shining eyes and eager voices to welcome "our soldier."

When mamma came down, a little later, she found him sitting on the big leather sofa with a Mary on each side, pressing close and eager, and chattering as fast as their tongues would go, telling the wonderful adventures of the night. He rose to meet her, looking a little embarrassed and shy; and mamma shook hands and looked in his face, and liked him.

As for Dick, he admired her from that moment, in the worshipping way that boys were wont to do. To him, as to Mary Murray, she was the "fairy lady."

Then the children dragged him out-of-doors, to show him the places where everything had

happened; and then up to the pine grove; and then into the garden; and then down to pay a visit to Mike.

When he returned to the house to take leave, the afternoon tea-table was ready on the veranda; and Mrs. Merington poured his tea, and then sat down beside him for a nice little quiet talk. And when at last he stepped on the train for the city, and looked back to see Mary 'n' Mary waving their hands from the dog-cart till the train rounded the curve, the young fellow had a curious sense that things had somehow changed, and that life was a little different.

It had been an eventful day for him as well as the children, and he had been through a good many changes of feeling since morning.

Yes, life *is* different when one makes two such friends as Papa and Mamma Merington.

It seemed a little different to the others, too, — to Mary Murray, back in her little, sloping bedroom; for she had had that night and day, — it was not a dream! to Mary Merington, who cried when she went to bed, because, as she

told her mother, it seemed as though they had had Mary Murray and then had lost her again.

After she was in bed she heard her father's and mother's voices, talking together earnestly for a long time; and the low, steady murmur lulled her to sleep. But she did not catch their words, nor hear mamma say mournfully, "No, I see it now; we have not been really kind. We were thinking most of our own child, and the benefit to her. It makes my heart ache to think what it will be to that poor child when we go back to town, and the house is closed, next month."

And again, "I do want her, dreadfully, my dear; but of course they would never give her up, — one girl in a family of boys!"

It seemed as though everybody's thoughts were running in the same direction. Next morning Mary was so long dressing that mamma went in to hurry her, and found her,

half-dressed, absorbed in rearranging her little bureau top. All her pretty new ivory things had been put together at one end, and she was now laying out the old ones to match, at the other end. To mamma's surprised question, she explained, a little shyly, "I am just 'making believe,' mamma, that Mary is my twin sister, like Elinor and Elizabeth, and lives here all the time. This is her end, and this is mine. Wouldn't that be nice!" she ended, wistfully.

"Wouldn't it be nice!" mamma repeated, with a rather uncertain smile. And then she hurried the little make-believer into her frock and down to breakfast.

But Mary's thoughts were not diverted from the new idea; and when they were at the table she smiled at her mother, while papa read his letters, and murmured, "If we had Mary, mamma, she'd sit over there, and we'd have somebody on each side of the table. Wouldn't that look nice!"

Papa looked up from his letter. He gave a quick glance of surprise at Mary, and then raised

his eyebrows at mamma. She shook her head and smiled. "Purely spontaneous," she said.

Just at that moment a shadow fell across the sunny glass door of the breakfast-room, and they all looked toward it.

There stood Mary Murray on the veranda, framed in the open sash. She wore a clean little print dress of faded green (with a bright stripe where the tuck had been let down), and the morning sun shone full on her curly mop of copper hair, turning it into ruddy gold.

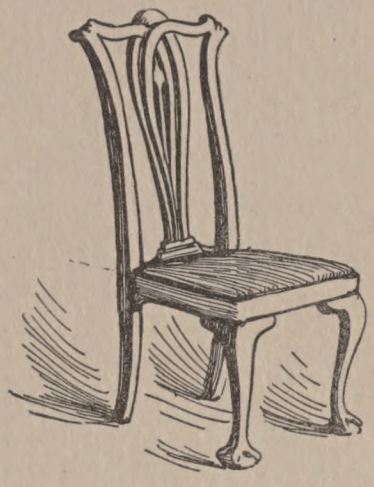
"What a picture!" said papa under his breath; but the best part of the picture was the eager, loving, happy smile that was brighter than the sunshine itself.

"Oh, it's Mary! Come in, Mary!" they all said at once. And in she came, explaining anxiously that she couldn't bring the eggs earlier because Baby Joe had a new tooth coming.

"Bring Mary a chair, Mary, and let's see how the table looks," said papa, gravely, to his daughter; and she flew to obey.

Then she beamed across the table at the make-

believe twin, while papa chose the biggest peach from the beautiful old silver basket and peeled it for her.



Mamma's sweet eyes were shining at papa with a smile of hope; and somehow, Mary Murray had never loved her so much as she did at that minute.

"Mary, Mary, Mary!" went on papa, as if talking to himself. "It's Mary here and Mary there, and how is anybody to know which is which? You will have to change your name, Mary Murray. I can't change Marykin's: I'm too used to it."

Mary Merington tucked up the corners of her mouth, as she always did at papa's funning; but Mary Murray answered him quite seriously.

"I've got another name," she said, with a sober, almost a sad, look; "only nobody ever calls me it now. My own mother used to call me 'Marigold,' because my name was Mary Golden, then, you see: it wasn't Murray."

"Your *own* mother?" repeated papa, in astonishment; and at the same moment mamma cried out, "Golden? Mary Golden? Child, who *was* your mother?"

She started from her chair, and caught Mary Murray by the arm. She shook her a little, and laughed, with tears in her eyes. "Are you Molly Burton's baby? Aren't you Mary Murray at *all?* Tell me quick!"

CHAPTER XIX.

MOLLY BURTON'S STORY

But Mary Murray was too startled and confused to tell anything, at first.

Mamma Merington sat down again and tried to calm herself; but she held Mary tight by both hands, while she questioned her.

The story came slowly, with troubled pauses for recollection. The brown eyes gazed far away, as if trying to look back through the years of the sorry, wandering life, beside which the little old cottage in McGowan's Lane seemed a very peaceful haven.

"Luke Golden was my father's name," she told them. "My mother died that time we lived in New York. It was ever so long ago, — I was 'most as little as Joe is. Then I stayed with the people down-stairs, till this mother came, and all the boys. Then we lived in other places, — a

good many places, — and father would go off to work, and stay. And then, after a long time, he didn't come back, — he had died, too, — and so we married this father we've got now, and came here to work for Mr. McGowan. That's all, I think. But this father and mother are not my very own, you see, because I can remember my own mamma, — she called me Marigold, and I sat on her bed while she curled my hair," she finished, with a wistful droop of the lips.

There was silence for a little while then. Mamma put both arms around the child and held her close, while she pressed her cheek on the splendid, shining mop of curls, which that dead mother had loved and caressed, and for whose sake she had given her baby the playful, loving nickname.

"Molly's baby!" she murmured at last, and held her away to look at her with new eyes. "Why didn't I feel it? — why didn't I know those eyes? But the eyes are all you have of your mother, dear, except that brave, loving, wilful heart: *that's* Molly Burton's own! Oh,

Mary, you dear, dear child, you *belong* to me! I promised your mother, years before you were born, that if she should die and leave you I

would take you for my own. Why did she never let me know?"

But there mamma checked herself; for she felt that she knew the reason, and it was best the daughter should not know.

Mary Murray yielded to her caresses as though

she were in a dream, and gazed at her with wide eyes, quite unable yet to take in this new wonder that had come to pass. But her heart was slowly filling with the sense of it, — they loved her, and she belonged to them, — that was all that she could comprehend at first, but it was enough to make her faint with happiness.

Papa Merington was the first to notice how pale she grew, and to realize that the child was really dangerously overwrought.

He looked about him for a safe diversion; and it was not hard to find. He smiled drolly as he touched mamma's shoulder and silently drew her attention to their own Mary.

She had not moved since her mother's first cry of amazement had startled her out of her chair. There she stood, with both hands clasped behind her, eyes and mouth both open, petrified with astonishment. Her wish was coming true with a suddenness that overwhelmed her.

Papa Merington laughed out, and caught her up and pinched her cheeks, — to see, he said, whether she was alive or really turned into stone.

They all laughed then, and the tension began to relax. Mary Merington found her tongue again, and in less than two minutes she had asked about forty questions, of her father, her mother, and Mary Murray. "Mary-Marigold" it began to be, now; for every tongue tripped, between the new name and the old one. "But we'd better begin at once and get used to it," papa declared. "It's as bad as naming a new kitten, and we've got to practise. Marigold — Marigold!"

They had not more than started to ask and answer the various questions that everybody was full of, when the maid came to say that the constable was in the library, and had something very important to say to Mr. Merington. (Even the maid looked disbelieving as she said it, and papa went off reluctantly, with a comical grimace).

Then mamma took the two excited little girls up to her pleasant morning room, and there on the cosy big couch, with a Mary snuggling close

on either side, she told them the story of Molly Burton.

"We lived next door to each other," mamma began, "and excepting Mary 'n' Mary there never were two such inseparable little neighbors. And we were Mary 'n' Mary, too, though no one ever called us so, and we hardly knew ourselves what our real names were, for she was always Molly and I was May. There was a gap in the hedge between our homes, where we crept back and forth, and on each side of the hole was a big box, where each kept her dolls and dishes. They were our play-houses, and oh dear! what good times we did have, down under that ragged old arbor-vitæ hedge! I never can smell arbor-vitæ, even now, without seeing that little smooth, worn gap between the bare stems; and on the other side is a little girl with smooth, dark hair and big brown

eyes, — like these! — sitting on the ground and nursing a great, stiff, old-fashioned doll, with painted, shiny black hair and eyes, and white kid hands and feet.

"That doll was named for me, — Lauretta May she was, and mine was Molly Bell.

"We used to plan what we would do when we grew up and married. We would always live next door to each other, and each was to have a little girl, and to name her for the other one. I did it, although I had lost my dear Molly long before that. But I never knew till this blessed day that Molly had kept her promise, too. Do you see, dear? My Mary here was named after your own mother; and *you* were named for *me!*"

Mary 'n' Mary looked at each other as though this discovery must make some great difference in them; and Mary Murray, — no, Mary Golden, — put both her little arms around mamma's waist and hugged her, with a sigh of perfect bliss.

"When we grew up," mamma went on, more slowly now, "the changes came, one by one.

"The Burtons moved to another house on

another street. We thought our hearts were broken, but we got used to it. Then when I was sixteen I went to New York to go to school with my cousins; and there I met papa. We were married on my nineteenth birthday,—Molly was my bridesmaid,—and after that for two years we were abroad.

"That was the time when it all happened,—when I lost Molly. She was married while I was in Italy. We did not even know it, until weeks after. He was a man I had never seen, and Molly herself had known him only a few weeks. It seemed as though she were bewitched, they all said afterward.

"He took her West, at first. I had one or two letters from her, but I knew even while I read them, that I had lost her; and presently even the letters stopped coming, after her mother died. And I could never find any trace of her again."

Mamma stopped. The story had grown too difficult: there was too much to be left out. She

could not tell Molly's child, watching eagerly for each word that seemed to bring the lost mother back to her, what manner of man her father had been, — how all the friends had distrusted him, and mourned over Molly's blindness when she made her wilful, runaway marriage, — nor how he had dragged her through poverty and shiftless wanderings, till pride and sorrow and bitterness had all united to build a wall that shut her at last from the knowledge and almost from the remembrance of her friends. Not from the faithful playmate, May's, however. One of the saddest parts of the story which was left unfinished was the struggle to hold her friend, and the fruitless search for her when she had vanished, — a search which ended in despair in the hopeless wilderness of the great city. Only to-day had May learned whether Molly were living or dead.

"But we have got our Marigold at least!" said she, suddenly, breaking away from the sad thoughts, and interrupting the children's happy chatter, "and we'll hold her fast, now we have found her!"

CHAPTER XX.

REALLY TRULY TWINS

They did not hold her much longer, though, that morning; for Mary Golden was very much like Mary Murray, it seemed, and Mary Murray's sense of responsibility could not sleep very long. There was Mike to be attended to: and what would her mother think had become of her?

So off she went, though Papa Merington pretended that he was going to have the big iron gates locked, to keep her from running away. And the joyful, incoherent tale of wonder that she carried home made Mrs. Murray fear the child had had a sunstroke and was light-headed in consequence.

Light-hearted she was, and light-footed, as she flew down the lane, after safely tethering Mike. What was to happen next she had no clear

idea, nor did she trouble herself to guess. It was sure to be something beautiful, and this happiest summer of her life would be happier yet.

Meanwhile, the story of her mother's childhood, and the way these dearest people on earth had claimed her for their own, made her walk in a happy trance, and almost fear that it could not all be true.

Behind her, at the big house, anxious and serious consultations were going on, — all about her!

"We must have her," mamma had declared, almost with tears of earnestness. "I will give them anything on earth they ask for, if they will give her up. I have coveted her a long time, but I thought it would not be right to separate her from her people. But now, if they are not her kin at all, surely it can be managed; for Molly Burton has not a relative living, — I am sure of that. Can't we do something this very day?"

Papa was less excited, but he was in earnest, too. Accordingly, that afternoon Mary 'n' Mary were allowed as a special treat to go with Andrews in the dog-cart to West Berket, to get the pony shod, and when they were safely out of the way a very serious and important interview took place at the Murray house.

There was not much difficulty about it, after all.

"Well, sir," Mrs. Murray said, at the end, "it's the truth I'll be sorry to lose her: she's a willing girl, and a good one to work as ever lived. But as you say, it's not as though she were my own; and I'd be sorry to stand in the way of her doing so well. And then, since Larry has cleared out, I declare, I feel as if the work was twice as easy; — though it's a shame to say so, poor lad!"

But on the way home papa observed: "The truth is, the absence of Brother Larry would be a compensation for almost any loss — though I suppose we can't expect his mother to look at it that way. And the pleasantest feature of the affair is that we have got rid of him without

burdening our consciences by working him off on our relations. It will be a long time before he shows himself in this part of the country again. That burglary was a blessing in disguise!"

It was a fact that Larry had "cleared out." So, too, had two of his most obnoxious friends; and the utmost activity of the Berket police only succeeded in establishing the significant fact that none of the trio had been seen since that stormy night when Mary Murray rang the bell. And they never did learn anything more.

But Mamma Merington was not interested in Larry's movements now. She was full of amused indignation at the way Mrs. Murray had taken their proposal. She had expected to plead for Mary: instead, it had been almost a bargain.

"It seemed as if dish-washing and baby-tending were the only things to be considered," she complained. "Why, I really believe, with what we are going to do for her, she will think herself better off!—better off, without that dear child than with her!"

"It makes it so much the easier for us. We

need feel no remorse at robbing the Murray family of their treasure," answered Papa Merington.

"That is true," said his wife, more cheerfully. And then she added, musingly, "How many things this discovery explains! It has puzzled and troubled me, I confess, that Mary, impulsive and affectionate as she is, seemed to have so little natural feeling for her brothers. The tie always seemed to be very slight. She loves us, already, far better than she does them. She is very fond of the baby, to be sure, — the baby and the bossy!" she added, laughing.

"Well, yes, it looks at present," assented papa, ruefully, "as if the principal difficulty will be parting Mary, not from the Murrays, but from Mike. That calf's a cow, or pretty near it: her horns are positively dangerous, — and those children treat her like a baby in arms. I shall not

be sorry, myself, to say good-by to Mike, — with the prospect that when next we see her she will be as big as her mother, and too old to tie blue ribbons on!"

They both laughed; and then as they strolled up the lane, arm in arm, they returned to the discussion of their future plans.

It had already been partly decided that the house should be closed early, this year, in order that the family might spend the beautiful weeks of September in the mountains, while the city house was being prepared for the winter.

Now that the new plans for the new daughter must be taken into consideration, this arrangement seemed still more desirable.

They would take Mary with them to the mountains, and the trip would serve to make the break between the old life and the new less abrupt, and give her time to become used to them before she was taken away from the old home altogether; for much as she loved the new friends, it was not

to be supposed that she could leave the old ones without feeling the parting.

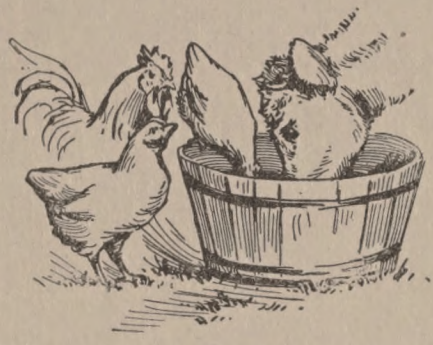
Of course Mary 'n' Mary were wild with delight at the prospect of travelling together.

They spent most of their time for many days beforehand in packing and repacking all their particular treasures, from bean-bags to flower-pots; and thus happily employed they were quite unaware of all the fuss of formalities that was going on over Mary Murray's unconscious head.

There were consultations with lawyers, and visits to court and judge; there were declarations to make, and papers to sign. But when mamma went to the city for these matters, she also bought and sent home many pretty and useful things for Mary-Marigold's use and wear on the journey; and these were all the children knew or thought about.

At last it was the evening before the journey was to begin. Mary had said good-by to everybody in McGowan's Lane; had cried a little at leaving "the baby and the bossy" for so long; had charged Mrs. Murray and the boys with full

instructions as to the care of Mike and the chickens in her absence; and had finally been carried off by mamma herself and Mary Merington, who came for her in the carriage.



They took her up to Mary's room, where two little white beds were standing, side by side, and the low bureau top was again arranged according to Mary Merington's ideas of twins.

Then came the lovely twilight hour, just before little folks' bedtime, when they sat quietly on the western veranda, watching the rosy sky, and dreaming each her own dream.

After awhile papa came out from the library with a handful of letters, and dropped one big, serious-looking, business envelope in mamma's lap.

She caught it up with a little cry of pleasure. "At last! Is it all done? Certainly — sure?" And then, "Robert, I cannot wait another hour! Why should we?"

He nodded, smiling, leaving it to her.

And then mamma took Marigold in her arms and kissed her tenderly and solemnly, and told her that the law had made her their own dear daughter, to love and keep forever.

"Marigold" said not one word. She kissed and clung in silence. But Mary Merington threw herself upon them, and hugged them both, wildly and rapturously, crying, "Oh, now she *is* my really, truly twin!"

"Capital! We'll make it twins, while we are about it!" said papa, laughing; but then he lifted the new twin in his arms, and kissed her very gravely. "Do you think you can be happy with us, little daughter, — daughter Marigold?" he asked.

"Happy! Oh, *how* I love you all!" breathed Mary Golden Merington.

THE END.

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